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outside his
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house in
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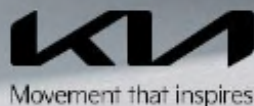
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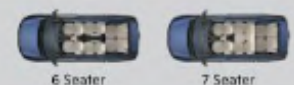
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History has a habit of biting back when you least expect it. Thirty-two years ago, Kashmir was on the brink of a communal hell. Homegrown jihadists, trained in Pakistan, unleashed a reign of terror specifically targeting members of the minority Kashmiri Pandit community, including prominent figures. This led to their rapid exodus from the Valley: perhaps the biggest story of internal mass displacement for political reasons since the Partition, tragically affecting 75,000 families. Despite the blurred record, an estimated 700 Kashmiri Pandits were killed, many of them brutally, though the state government figures put the number at 219. About 90 per cent of the community were estranged from their homeland. Most fled to neighbouring Jammu and other states in India. The houses they left behind, some in ruins, others razed to the ground, are mute testimony to that dark era of barbarity.

Now, these monuments of bloody excesses have begun to speak again, and loudly. The immediate trigger for the return of the issue to public discourse is the recently released film, *The Kashmir Files*, which is filling up cinema halls and setting social media on fire. The film looks at this shameful, blood-soaked chapter in Kashmir's history in all its raw brutality, bereft of any nuance. In its portrayal, people stood by as silent spectators and even collaborated with the killers as the community was violently targeted.

Those were chilling times. The air rang with slogans like '*Raliv, galiv ya chaliv* (Convert, face death or flee)'. Warning posters were pasted on buildings in downtown Srinagar and the muezzin's call was replaced by the deathly voice of Kalashnikov-toting religious crusaders. Rape bespoiled Kashmiriyat, and corpses lay on the streets as a warning to others. No wonder *The Kashmir Files* has touched a raw nerve. In a political environment conducive to its propagation, it is well on its way to becoming the highest grosser of all time in Hindi cinema. Sadly, accompanying it all too frequently are calls of hatred, not very different from those that Kashmir heard in 1990.

A film can't possibly put one event in perspective, especially when set in the convoluted history of Kashmir. Counting from before 1947: Dogra rule and the social realities of that time, the accession to India, Sheikh Abdullah's troubled passage right up to the 1975 accord with Indira Gandhi, his death in 1982 and the rise of Farooq Abdullah as his political heir, the rigged elections of 1987, the eruption of militancy aided by a scheming Pakistan, a Union home minister's daughter's kidnapping making the Indian State look weak, the ill-timed return of Jagmohan as Governor, the fated interplay in a canvas where the actors included V.P. Singh as a coalition prime minister, L.K. Advani of the BJP as a backseat driver and a divided political and security establishment that failed in every respect to prevent the tragic and traumatic departure of the Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley.

After the Pandits fled in 1990, over 45,000 people were killed in the next two decades due to the strife. Of these, 22,500 were terrorists, over 6,000 security personnel and,

sadly, over 17,000 civilians. The break-up of the dead is a grim reminder of the ongoing battle, but the plight of the Pandits remains a festering sore. They stayed in forgotten tented cities in Jammu and elsewhere for decades, swallowing their trauma in silence, many of them still trapped in enforced poverty. Initially, they were offered cash relief and free rations. But it was finally the Manmohan Singh government that built *pucca* houses for them—though 5,000-odd flats in the bald environs of Jammu can never hold the paradise of their memories. It also began the other process of reparation, starting with 3,000 jobs for Pandits in the Valley, along with quarters set out in two colonies, in Srinagar and Sheikhpora in Budgam. The Modi government promises to up that to 6,000-plus jobs and build more accommodation in the Valley.

But can ghettos heal the wounds of society? Can we answer displacement with portacabins or one-bedroom tenements? Can we create the idea of home amidst concertina wires, spaces where only fearful menfolk will go—that too temporarily? Closure will come only if the Pandits can return to their real homes, their old city neighbourhoods, village alleys and orchards, to a landscape restored to normalcy in all its fullness. And Kashmir has to heal for that. No one has ever been held accountable for the rapes and the corpses—whether the victim was a Pandit or not. And the guilty, ultimately, are often political. Justice is the precondition of a true democracy.

What must we do to retell the story? First, the tragedy must be accounted for. It must be quantified and analysed. The collective onus upon us is to help lead the victims to closure and allow the nation to reach for a saner future.

In its laser focus on the incidents of 1990, *The Kashmir Files* had to omit much of the story. In this week's cover story, Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa goes beyond the immediate and answers the key questions: What events led up to the Pandit exodus? What happened to them afterward? What are the feasible closures for the Pandit community in their efforts to regain their roots in the Valley? Chengappa, who travelled to Srinagar and Jammu, along with Group Photo Editor Bandeeep Singh, found there are no easy solutions. "It will be a long haul," he says. "But, as the saying goes, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step'. We should delay no further."

The controversy, though, comes at an inopportune time. After abrogating Article 370 in August 2019, the Modi government has been attempting to create a Naya Kashmir. Demonising a community will not help this effort, it must go beyond narrow political considerations. Bringing Kashmiri Pandits back to their homes with dignity and safety will be the best testimonial of their noble intentions for Kashmir.



July 26, 2021

(Aron Purie)

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Abandoned houses of
 Kashmiri Pandits in Srinagar's
 Habba Qadal locality

BANDEEP SINGH



COVER STORY

AFTER THE EXODUS

The 1990 mass migration of terror-stricken Kashmiri Pandits is the subject of a new film. As passions rise over their plight, a relook into the crisis that tore up the Valley

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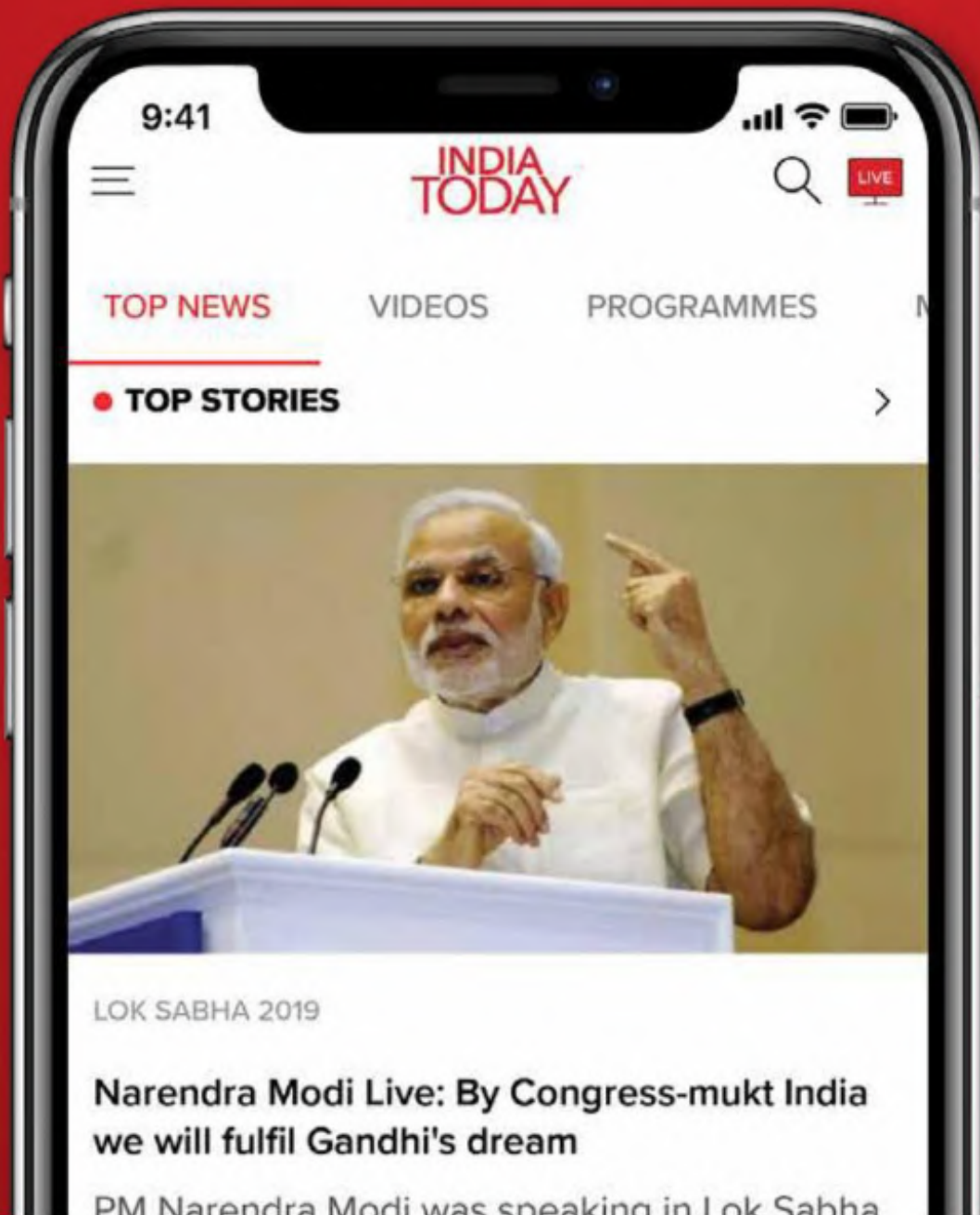
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STEADY PROGRESS

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida
with Prime Minister Narendra
Modi at Hyderabad House

INDO-JAPAN TIES

A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP DEEPENS

By Sujan Chinoy

Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida's two-day visit to India, the first in-person summit since prime minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan in October 2018, has succeeded in further consolidating the Special Strategic and Global Partnership in a year that marks 70 years of diplomatic ties.

The hiatus in summits in the past few years notwithstanding, bilateral ties have greatly strengthened since 2014. As the chief minister of Gujarat, PM Modi had an excellent understanding of Japan's potential role in transforming the Indian economy. His personal friendship with Shinzo Abe not only stood the test of time but also

laid an enduring foundation for the future. Abe's successors, prime ministers Yoshihide Suga and Kishida, were key players in that process.

Kishida's visit provided an invaluable opportunity to work in tandem for sustainable growth in a post-Covid world with focus on the Quad Vaccine Partnership, critical technologies,



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resilient supply chains, infrastructure and clean energy. As the world embraces the goal of carbon neutrality, the launch of the India-Japan Clean Energy Partnership harbours enormous scope for collaboration in the production of electric vehicles, batteries, charging infrastructure, solar technology, hydrogen and ammonia.

The Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) in cybersecurity and ICT (information and communications technology) will advance information-sharing and capacity-building in a digital era characterised by new challenges in 5G, Open RAN, telecom network security, submarine cable systems and quantum communications. Highly skilled Indian IT professionals will also be able to work in Japan in the ICT sector, adding to the success of the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) track.

It is evident that the joint statement has succeeded in sending a strong signal to stakeholders in Japan to make renewed efforts to deepen economic and investment ties with India. The shared intention to realise JPY 5 trillion (approximately \$42 billion or Rs 3.2 lakh crore) of public and private investment and financing from Japan to India over the next five years is a measure of the confidence on both sides in the future of the partnership.

Japanese technology has proved to be a game-changer in India's modernisation in many sectors, including the automotive industry. High-speed rail is another such example. In a country increasingly stressed by water scarcity and the scourge of waste water effluents, the MoC on Decentralised Domestic Wastewater Management will introduce Japan's Johkasou technology to boost sewage treatment and recycling infrastructure in India.

The outlining of the India-Japan Industrial Competitiveness Partnership (IJICP) Roadmap during the summit should also help improve manufacturing standards in India in the MSME sector, which accounts for a large chunk of exports.

The Modi government has

THE TIES THAT BIND

➤ On a visit to India in 2014, then Japan PM Shinzo Abe announced a target of 3.5 trillion Yen (**Rs 2.2 lakh crore**) for Japanese investment and financing in India over five years

➤ Auto major Suzuki's contribution to Japan's investments in India is a planned 150 billion Yen (**Rs 9,450 crore**) in the production of electric vehicles and batteries

➤ On his visit over March 19-20 this year, PM Fumio Kishida announced an increase in Japan's investment and financing target to 5 trillion Yen (**Rs 3.2 lakh crore**) over the next five years

➤ Bilateral trade in 2020 amounted to \$1.17 trillion (**Rs 89 lakh crore**) (\$363 billion/ Rs 27.6 lakh crore in Indian exports, \$807 billion/ Rs 61.4 lakh crore in imports)

INDIA FIGURES PROMINENTLY AS AN ALTERNATIVE INVESTMENT DESTINATION IN JAPAN'S "CHINA PLUS" MODEL OF RISK MITIGATION

successfully engaged Japan in reviewing certain aspects of the India-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) pertaining to Indian exports of fish *surimi* (fish paste). The decision to hold the inaugural fighter exercise between the Japan Air Self-Defence Force and the Indian Air Force, coming on the back of existing naval and ground forces cooperation, will deepen mutual trust and advance interoperability.

The strength of the India-Japan partnership cannot arbitrarily be benchmarked to geopolitical issues rocking the world, whether in Ukraine or

elsewhere. The Quad, in any case, is not a Europe-centric construct. India and Japan have acknowledged in the joint statement their commitment to a peaceful, stable and prosperous world supported by a rules-based order, with respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and the peaceful resolution of disputes at the core. The rejection of the threat or use of force to alter status quo hints at China's unilateralism and military coercion across the Indo-Pacific.

Kishida's visit provided a much-awaited opportunity for the prime ministers of India and Japan to engage in a face-to-face meeting ahead of the Quad Leaders' Summit to be held in Tokyo later this summer. Japan is making purposeful efforts to adopt a "China Plus" model as part of a broader risk mitigation strategy. India figures prominently as an alternative destination for Japanese investments. ■

The author is a former Indian Ambassador to Japan and currently director general of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Views expressed are personal



ANI

UTTARAKHAND

How to Win Despite Losing

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

Pushkar Singh Dhami may have lost the election but retained the big prize at the Uttarakhand BJP legislators' meet. On the evening of March 21, amid thunderous applause, he was chosen to continue as chief minister of the hill state. He had lost his Khatima seat to old rival Bhuwan Chandra Kapri by 7,273 votes, creating a blip in what was otherwise a splendid victory for the party. By all accounts, Dhami was the anchor in the BJP scoring a second successive victory with 47 seats in the 70-member state assembly.

Dhami, who is just 46, seems to have the backing of his legislators; at least six of them have already offered to vacate their seats for the second-term CM. The buzz is that the party is looking for a seat in the Kumaon region, either Didihat represented by party veteran Bishan Singh Chuphal or Dhami loyalist Suresh Gariya's Kapkot seat. Meanwhile, sources close to Dhami say they are talking to two Congress MLAs as well to suss out their constituencies. Any 'sacrifice' will not go in vain. The BJP even has to send a Rajya Sabha MP from the state next month.

The party doesn't have a tradition of rewarding politicians who lose polls, so it was a tough decision to make an exception for Dhami. The state unit fully backed him, which made it easier for Dhami to convince the party high command. In the past, Himachal Pradesh's Prem Kumar Dhumal had to make way for Jai Ram Thakur after he was defeated in his Sujampur assembly segment in 2017.

The party had made an exception for Smriti Irani in 2014, inducting her into the Union cabinet despite her losing the election from Amethi. Party

< IF THE CROWN FITS

CM Pushkar Singh Dhami being felicitated in Haridwar, Feb. 28

insiders explain that Dhami's case had merit. He presented himself as a doer, and has been able to take party colleagues along in an otherwise deeply factionalised state unit. The party had also built a poll narrative around his age, sought the vote for "a young leader and his young cabinet". The BJP did consider other names, including Rajya Sabha MP Anil Baluni, ex-CM Gen. B.C. Khanduri's daughter Ritu Khanduri Bhushan and former minister and Srinagar MLA Dhan Singh Rawat. But they chose to go with Dhami.

Party leaders were fearful of setting a precedent, given that Dhami had lost the election. In neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, former deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya too lost in Sirathu in Kaushambi district. The central leadership is under pressure to retain him. The state has a bicameral system and Maurya is a member of the legislative council. What worked in Dhami's favour is the support of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. There's a general belief that Dhami was the man who helped turn around the party's electoral fortunes in the state. In July last year, Dhami was hoisted into the top spot after the BJP central leadership had dumped Trivendra Singh Rawat and Tirath Singh Rawat in the space of four months.

Dhami, who was sworn in on March 23, is now the first chief minister to return to power in the state. His first challenge will be appointing a fresh cabinet and ensuring that infighting within the state BJP does not affect the government's performance. The state's economy is in a mess, and it will require all his skills to get many of the projects in the works up and running. Dhami will also have to ramp up revenues to implement the BJP's poll promises including three LPG cylinders free of cost to BPL families and a Rs 8,000 grant to farmers. The youth are looking for job opportunities and now that he has a full five-year tenure, he will have to deliver on this too. ■

CHALLENGES AHEAD

➤ **Get a fresh cabinet:** Dhami has to ensure that infighting does not affect governance

➤ **Revive tourism:** Tourism is the mainstay of the economy, but two years of Covid have decimated sector

➤ **Poll promises:** CM must find ways to increase revenue to pay for all the promised sops

GOA

A QUESTION OF METTLE AND ORE

By Kiran D. Tare

On March 21, 11 days after the BJP won 20 of the 40 assembly seats in Goa (one short of a simple majority), the party ended the suspense and announced that incumbent chief minister Pramod Sawant would continue to lead the state government. Stability is not an issue. Almost as soon as the results were out, the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) announced its “unconditional support”. Three Independents—Chandrakant Shetye, Alexio Reginald Lourenco and Antonio Vaz—are also now onboard, so the party has the support of 25 MLAs.

Sawant wasn't an automatic choice, five-time MLA Vishwajeet Rane had his hat in the ring too. Rane represents Valpoi constituency next door to Sawant's Sankhali. They have a similar socio-economic profile too, coming as they do from the Maratha community, which is very influential in north Goa. Sawant is an Ayurvedic doctor while Rane has a degree in business administration. Rane, who switched over to the BJP from the



ORE AND DUST

Vedanta's mine in Goa's Codli, now abandoned; (inset) second term CM Pramod Sawant

MILIND SHELTE

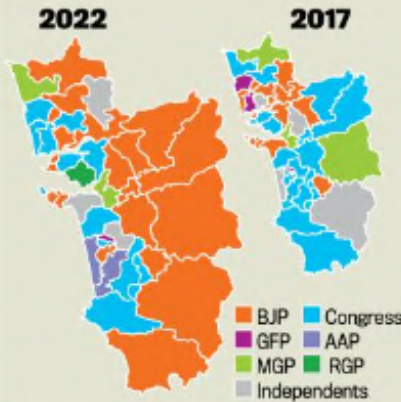
THE GOA MOSAIC

Congress in 2017, also had the backing of several 'new entrants' into the party. That the BJP plumped for Sawant is an indication that the party does not want to hurt its loyalists. Union minister Narendra Tomar, the BJP central observer who oversaw Sawant's selection as legislative party leader, told reporters categorically that he would be CM for the next five years.

Sawant will have to maintain a fine balance among the various communities while allocating ministerial portfolios. Two Catholics, veterans Mauvin Godinho and Atanasio Monserrate, could get plum departments. Apart from that, Rohan Khaunte, the only Saraswat MLA, is also likely to become a minister. The community, which makes up 7 per cent of Goa's population, is highly influential in business and social circles. They have been upset with the BJP ever since the party denied Utpal Parrikar, son of the late CM Manohar Parrikar, a ticket in his father's constituency, Panaji. Khaunte only joined the BJP in January but may still get a portfolio. The BJP needs him as a bridge between the party and the Saraswats.

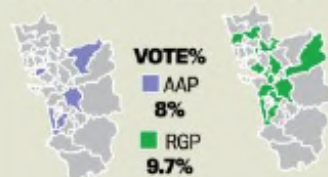
Sawant says his focus will be to make Goa self-reliant on various fronts, and this includes a roadmap to end the state's dependency on Maharashtra and Karnataka for essential commodities. The plan looks attractive but implementation may be a herculean task. Goa's economy has been in a shambles following the March 2018 Supreme Court ban on iron ore mining and tourism, the other mainstay, collapsing with the pandemic too. The SC has made it clear that mining can be resumed only after fresh auctions of the mining leases (the last were issued in the 1980s). Local mining firms have strongly opposed the idea, saying the mining giants from outside will take over the state's natural resources. Goa has been losing annual revenue to the tune of Rs 6,000 crore since mining came to a halt. The number is significant, considering the fragile nature of Goa's finances—the 2021-22 budget was Rs 25,000 crore, and the state has an almost equal amount in debt.

The mining sector used to provide



THE CHALLENGERS...

The Revolutionary Goan Party (RGP) and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) secured more than 3,000 votes in certain constituencies, enough to spoil anyone's chances in Goa



direct and indirect employment to around 250,000 people. Ambar Timblo, president of the Goa Mineral Ore Exporters' Association, is still hopeful. "The central law does provide necessary solutions to bypass the auction process," he points out. A senior BJP leader, however, differs. "What's the harm if outsiders extract Goa's iron ore? Finally, they will be generating revenue," he says. "The government's only concern should be jobs for the locals. There will be no issues if the locals are happy."

There's potential for conflict here. The BJP may be forced to take into account "local sentiments", an outcome of the emergence of the Revolutionary Goan Party (RGP) as a strong regional force. With 9.7 per cent votes, the RGP made its presence felt in its first-ever election. A strong advocate of 'Goa for Goans', the RGP has found a base in 10 of the state's 40 constituencies. If it expands its base in north Goa, a bastion of the BJP, the ruling party will be in trouble. "The RGP can't be ignored, it has energised the youth. I see it emerging as the new Congress in Goa," says

...AND THE CHALLENGES

➤ **Iron ore mining:** The state's economy has been badly hit since mining came to a halt in March 2018. The government will have to follow the Supreme Court's ruling on auctioning of minefields

➤ **Boost to tourism:** The backbone of the state economy (after mining) is going through its worst phase. A new tourism policy has been announced, implementation is key now

➤ **Mopa airport:** Goa's second airport at Mopa has already missed its original deadline by two years. This airport is likely to be a game-changer for the north Goa region

➤ **Recruitment:** Sawant faced allegations of corruption, nepotism and regionalism in recruitments for state jobs in the first term. The new government must bring transparency in recruitment processes

➤ **Green concerns:** The south Goa region is battling the government over destruction of the environment for development projects. An amicable solution must be found

political commentator Rajendra Desai. With victory in nine of 20 seats, the BJP did quite well in its "weak region", south Goa. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is now a force here, winning two seats and making inroads in another five.

The BJP was able to beat the anti-incumbency of 10 years because of strong backing from the OBCs (Other Backward Classes), its traditional supporters. With Catholics and Saraswats still keeping their distance, the BJP needs to consolidate its base among the OBCs. If the MGP—a party of dominant castes opposed to the BJP before the polls—is allowed to join the government, the OBCs will be hurt. But the two MGP MLAs are the BJP leadership's insurance against rebellion breaking out in the party. "We have the three Independents and MGP's two MLAs, which takes our numbers to 25, a comfortable majority," says Devendra Fadnavis, the BJP's Goa in-charge. This is a counter-strategy to secure the government if Rane raises a flag of revolt. Seems like a prelude for turbulent political scenes in the future. ■

PAYTM

THE BELEAGUERED DECACORN

By M.G. Arun

ON THE ROPES

Vijay Shekhar
Sharma, founder
and CEO, Paytm



The story of Paytm, once described as one of the biggest start-up stories in India's financial services sector, appears to have become a cautionary tale of everything that could go wrong after an IPO. Founded by Vijay Shekhar Sharma—who rose to prominence after demonetisation as the poster boy of digital payments—Paytm has struggled to live up to the massive expectations preceding its debut on the stock market just five months ago, in November 2021. It is currently facing a raft of problems, from an RBI-ordered audit of its IT (information technology) systems, a temporary ban on the 'onboarding' (registration) of new customers until this audit is completed, and a

sustained, catastrophic fall in its share price. On March 21, shares of One97, Paytm's parent company, were trading at Rs 565.35—an over 70 per cent drop in value from the issue price of Rs 2,150 just five months ago.

In a notice to the exchanges on March 12, Paytm said the RBI had

**PAYTM WAS
ALREADY IN
ROUGH WATERS
AFTER ITS IPO
SINKING 27% ON
ITS FIRST DAY IN
THE MARKET**

noted "certain material supervisory concerns at Paytm Payments Bank", and that the company was "taking immediate steps to comply with RBI directions, including the appointment of a reputed external auditor to conduct a comprehensive audit of [the firm's] IT systems". It also stressed that the RBI's ban on registering new customers would not impact services for existing customers. Per media reports, Paytm Payments Bank (PPB) has 58 million account holders and 300 million mobile wallets.

"All existing users of Paytm UPI, Paytm Wallet, Paytm FAS tag and bank accounts can continue to use these instruments, including debit cards and net banking, for payments," the company said. In an interview following the

PAYTM'S PROBLEMS

Rs 2,150 OFFER PRICE

Rs 1,950 LISTING PRICE (Nov. 18, 2021)

Rs 565.35

One97's share price on March 21, a loss of over 70% in five months

Rs 1 lakh crore

Market capitalisation at the time of listing

Rs 36,664.3 crore

Market capitalisation on March 21, 2022

INVESTOR WORRIES

- The lack of clarity around Paytm's business model
- The firm is too diversified, with too many moving parts
- Fierce competition in the digital payments sector
- No clarity on the road to profitability

GETTYIMAGES

ban, Sharma acknowledged that the RBI had found problems, saying it had "pointed out some line items that need to be sorted out," but offered little detail on what exactly those were. "There is some work the RBI wanted us to do... they have guided us," he said on the matter. Perhaps as a result of the lack of clarity, speculation has been rife about what triggered the ban. One theory that Sharma had to push back against was that there had been a data breach at PPB, with customer information being shared with Chinese firms, some of whom own a stake in Paytm. (One97 is backed by China's Alibaba Group Holding, and its affiliate, Ant Group.)

Paytm had already been in rough financial waters after its stockmarket

debut last year. There was no honeymoon period—on November 18, One97's share price sank 27 per cent, the biggest opening-day drop for a share sale worth more than Rs 1,000 crore. The stock had listed at Rs 1,950, 9.3 per cent down from its offer price of Rs 2,150, and ended the day at Rs 1,564, wiping out about Rs 5,000 crore of investor wealth. By November 22, the company's market cap was below \$13.1 billion (Rs 1 lakh crore), at \$11.6 billion (Rs 88,184.67 crore) against a listing expectation of about \$18.4 billion (Rs 1.4 lakh crore). It has continued to fall, with One97's market cap at \$4.8 billion (Rs 36,664.32 crore) on March 21. Brokerage firm Macquarie, which was one of the earliest to predict Paytm's

market troubles, has pegged its price estimate for the firm's shares at Rs 450.

When it comes to why investors are abandoning Paytm in such numbers, analysts highlight the lack of clarity around the firm's business model, saying it has its fingers in too many pies and that there are so many moving parts it is difficult for investors to get a handle on what exactly Paytm's business model is. Another factor is the increasing competition the firm faces. "There is no clarity as to what the business model will be, what the major growth drivers are and what the road to profitability looks like. Until [Paytm offers] a clear vision on [these points], the stock price will remain pretty much pinned down," said Dipan Mehta, director at Elixir Equities, in an interview.

Paytm's woes also highlight some of the larger issues with tech start-ups that experts have red-flagged. On the bourses, start-ups face sustained scrutiny on various metrics, including their dominance of their respective sectors, their access to capital and their ability to sustain losses while building up market share. Investors also need to know the timeline within which these start-ups are expecting to turn a profit. Without clarity on these aspects, valuations fall. There is also fierce competition in the digital payments sector, especially after the government's UPI ended Paytm's first-mover advantage in this space.

Macquarie does not see much hope for the beleaguered firm in the immediate future, saying "Paytm's valuation [remains] expensive, especially as profitability should remain elusive for a long time". And while troubles continue to mount for Paytm and One97, investors continue to see the value of their investments slide. Moving forward, this could also damage investor confidence in start-ups in general, a worrying sign for other start-ups hopeful of a public listing. According to media reports, the scale of Paytm's troubles has already led some to delay their debuts, with target valuations also being reappraised. The only clarity, in fact, seems to be that rough waters still lie ahead. ■

HYDERABAD

ENVIRONMENT VS REALTY

By Amarnath K. Menon

On March 15, in the state assembly, Telangana chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao announced his intention to repeal a 1996 government order—GO111—which creates a 10-km-wide buffer zone around the Himayatsagar and Osmansagar reservoirs outside Hyderabad. The order severely limits construction and industry in the buffer zone to protect the city's water supply and the local ecology, since these reservoirs are also a key element of local flood control systems. However, with the construction of the Mallannasagar reservoir, Hyderabad is no longer dependent on Himayatsagar and Osmansagar for water. Describing GO111 as therefore "redundant", the CM told the state assembly that his government was awaiting the report of an expert committee on the matter, but that it was strongly disposed toward a repeal.

The announcement immediately kicked up a storm. Some accused the TRS (Telangana Rashtra Samithi) government of having ulterior motives, while others spoke of the ecological cost of the decision. Yet others pointed out that lax enforcement of GO111 had already allowed illegal construction to come up in the area, and that a repeal would effectively legalise these properties. Opposition parties also accused the TRS of seeking to profit off the decision—since land prices will appreciate sharply following a deregulation—with the Congress demanding a look into ownership patterns within the protected areas. "We demand an open inquiry of the land protected by the government order. How much has the land ownership changed, how many times, and who purchased these lands?" asks AICC (All India Congress Committee)

spokesperson Dasoju Sravan.

The decision will impact some 132,000 acres of land across 84 villages in Shabad, Shamshabad, Rajendra Nagar, Chevella, Moinabad and Shankarapally mandals in west Hyderabad. "Scrapping GO111 at one go might create anarchy," the chief minister said. "Therefore, the approach has to be a measured one. We will direct the minister for municipal administration and urban development K.T. Rama Rao to

study the matter and ensure that master plans and green zones are drawn up for all the [affected] villages." This decision also has a long history—the TRS has talked of revoking GO111 since at least 2014, when Telangana was created. In 2018, while campaigning in Chevella, Chief Minister KCR had also made this a poll promise.

In recent years, many members of the political class—from the TRS and beyond—as well as urban developers



and speculators have acquired huge parcels of land in villages that fall within the Hyderabad urban agglomeration at paltry prices. Some 'especially enterprising' realtors have also thrived by selling plots of land in protected areas to gullible buyers by downplaying or dismissing the restrictions on construction under GO111. Prices in these areas range from Rs 5-10 crore per acre, and these figures are expected to double if GO111 is revoked. Realtors and land registry officials say the steepest increases will be seen in about 20 of the 84 villages. These areas hold huge economic potential due to their proximity to the nearby IT (information technology) corridors.

While local landowners will see huge gains, their profits will come at an ecological cost. Activists repeat that the Himayatsagar and Osmansagar reservoirs and their buffer areas are

part of the city's flood control system—they catch the overflow from the Musi river, which flows through Hyderabad, in periods of heavy rain. The concretisation of their catchment areas means downstream areas could easily be drowned. Hyderabad is already prone to flooding, as was seen two years ago. "It will be a disaster if GO111 is revoked," says Rajendra Singh, a water conservation activist. Climate change expert B.V. Subba Rao says the priority is to develop a conservation plan for the entire catchment area, which is 2,076 sq. km in size—over 10 times the area notified under GO111. "The issue is sustainable water resource management—this is the relevance of GO111. [The Himayatsagar and Osmansagar] reservoirs were built in the 1920s as flood control structures. They are also a zero-energy water supply model with no carbon emissions. They must be preserved. What is being planned will ensure their disappearance in the next 30 years."

GO111: A QUICK TAKE

Issued on March 8, 1996, GO111 establishes a 10-km-wide buffer zone around the Himayatsagar and Osmansagar reservoirs. It mandates that 60 per cent of this area remain open (with roads, at the most) to ensure a catchment area for the reservoir, and prohibits the construction of all potential sources of pollution—from industries to hotels and residential areas. About 90 per cent of the total area is classified as 'recreational' or for conservation under the Hyderabad master plan.

CHANGE MAKER

Telangana Chief Minister
K. Chandrabab Naidu in
Wanaparthy, Mar. 9



The TRS already has a controversial record when it comes to urban land management. For one, though it amended the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation Act six years ago to establish a framework for tribunals for illegal construction cases, it has not constituted a single one thus far. In December 2014, it also issued order GO59, which allowed the regularisation of properties that encroached on government land, for a nominal fee. Many point out that this runs directly against the spirit of anti-encroachment laws, and that GO111 was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2000 when it was challenged by a group of realtors. The issue of illegal constructions in the buffer zone was then taken to the NGT (National Green Tribunal) which asked for a government inquiry. "Scrapping GO111 will open the floodgates for real estate projects," says Thakur Raj Kumar Singh, who took the case to the NGT. The tribunal had directed the government to furnish a report on his allegation of over 12,000 encroachments and unlawful constructions in the buffer

zone, and though an expert committee was constituted in 2016, no report came of it. "The state ignored repeated reminders from the NGT about the report. Ultimately, the case was closed," recalls Singh.

A repeal of GO111 will allow the regularisation of many large projects already constructed in the protected area. This is despite the fact that there was no environment impact assessments of these projects, and there is no management plan to address the loss of the Himayatsagar and Osmansagar catchment areas for flood control. Nonetheless, the TRS is sure to reap political gain should the repeal go through—it fulfils a long-standing poll promise and is popular among landowners in the protected areas. Reportedly, the CM is also toying with the idea of advancing the upcoming assembly poll, currently scheduled for November 2023, to make the most of the political boost that may result from a repeal of GO111. And if, as critics allege, much of the land is owned by TRS members, it will also give its candidates bigger war chests for the election. ■

MISSING

ST 13, Sariska's most fertile tiger, has not been seen since February

**RAJASTHAN**

A TIGER IN EVERY FORT?

By Rohit Parihar

When the CBI on March 11 arrested Balya Bawaria, last of the accused in two cases of tiger poaching in 2003-04 in Sariska, it brought back memories of big cats being wiped out from the tiger reserve in Alwar, Rajasthan. That nightmare was followed by the first translocation of tigers in India—to Sariska, beginning 2008. Despite numerous tense moments and setbacks seen in the Sariska experiment, prominent politicians in Rajasthan are keen to replicate it for creating safe havens for tigers from Ranthambore at four places where the big cats used to live once upon a time. As Ranthambore National Park has reached its full

capacity, male tigers are straying out and attacking each other and even humans. With the assembly election due next year, politicians are pushing for the new tiger homes to be located in their respective constituencies so that they can showcase it as their achievement.

While former CM Vasundhara Raje and her MP son, Dushyant Singh, are keen on tiger relocation to Durrah range of Mukundara Hill Tiger Reserve in Jhalawar district, Rajasthan urban development and housing minister Shanti Dhariwal prefers a different part of the same reserve—Seljar range in Kota district. Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla wants tigers to be relocated to Ramgarh Vishdhari in his native Bundi

district, but Diya Kumari, who represents Rajsamand in the Lok Sabha, is pushing for Kumbhalgarh, which is in her constituency. Former Punjab governor V.P. Singh Badnore, who was head of the task force for the Sariska relocation experiment, however, insists that more tigers be brought there before planning for new reserves.

"Tiger relocation to a new place has to be a scientific decision," says Deep N. Pandey, principal chief forest conservator and head of Forest Force, Rajasthan. "It calls for years of preparation to rebuild the ecosystem for tigers and then constant monitoring for years to ensure tigers adapt to the new place." Officials like him call Sariska an ongoing learning process and are reluctant to declare it an outright success. Until last year, they were looking at the demand to bring male tigers to Sariska to address the extreme gender imbalance there, but then two male tigers in the reserve fathered a few cubs, including some male ones, and the plan was deferred.

But a month and a half ago, just when the birth of new cubs had taken the total number of tigers in Sariska to 27, the highest in decades, the reserve's most fertile male tiger went missing. Known as ST 13, the tiger had fathered

at least eight cubs. Officials cite its disappearance as a warning that anything can go wrong and start a downslide in a tiger reserve. The demand from politicians for new reserves is worrying those entrusted with relocation as they know it takes consistent, long-term efforts to prepare a habitat that can be a permanent home to tigers.

Unlike Sariska and Panna in Madhya Pradesh, where reintroduction of tigers took place within years of their population being wiped out without any other significant loss to the biodiversity necessary for the species to thrive, the new places being proposed have been without tigers for decades, and the ecosystem, including the tiger's prey base, has seen severe depletion. While relocation to Sariska and Panna focused on creating a safety net against the main cause of the disappearance of tigers from there—poaching—the reasons why tigers disappeared from the other sites haven't been adequately analysed so far. Officials point to Mukundara Hill Tiger Reserve as an example of relocation gone wrong. The reserve lost three tigers and four cubs within days in 2020, while a tigress

had to be treated for injuries.

Of the four places where tigers from Ranthambore are being sought to be relocated, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has approved Ramgarh Vishdhari as the state's fourth tiger reserve—a notification is in the pipeline. Adjoining Ranthambore National Park, it's located in Om Birla's Bundi-Kota Lok Sabha constituency. Male tigers occasionally venture into this area, but rarely stay long. Yet, Ramgarh Vishdhari's proximity to Ranthambore on its northeast has made it an acceptable choice for a new tiger reserve. To its south is the Seljar range of Mukundara Hill, Rajasthan's third tiger reserve after Ranthambore and Sariska.

Ex-CM Raje, who is the MLA from Jhalapattan in Jhalawar district, and her son Dushyant, MP from Jhalawar-Baran, managed to get Mukundara declared a tiger reserve in 2017 ahead of Ramgarh Vishdhari, and then shifted tigers to its Durrah range, which extends into Jhalawar, instead of Seljar range in Kota district. They succeeded in getting the NTCA's approval despite resistance from some state wildlife

officials who argued that Durrah didn't have a proper prey base. Keeping a tiger couple inside a massive enclosure built in Durrah was projected as a safer bet than Seljar, where the prey base had been strengthened over years, but which also has more human population around it. The 24-hectare enclosure, however, could not save the tigers. In fact, some suspect that it became the cause of deaths by offering no space for

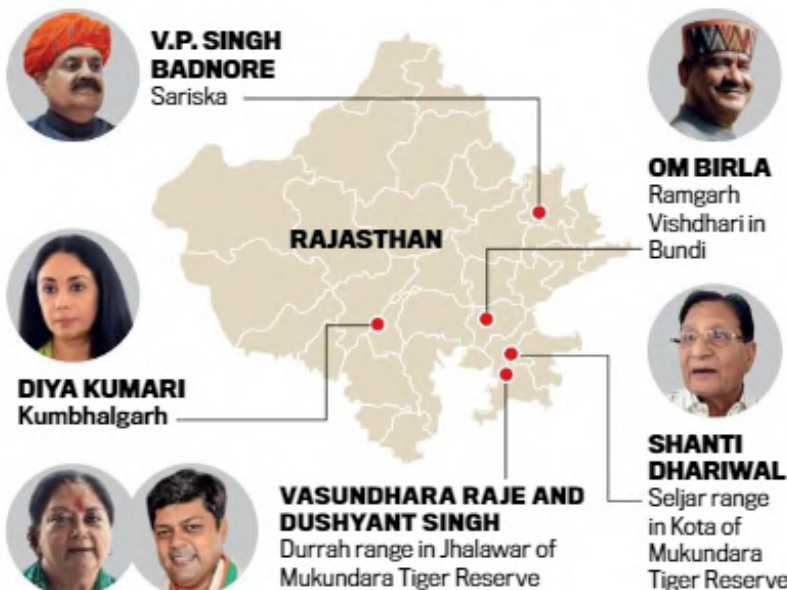
“RELOCATING TIGERS HAS TO BE A SCIENTIFIC DECISION. IT TAKES YEARS TO REBUILD THE ECOSYSTEM ADEQUATELY.”

dispersal for a tigress with newborns in the vicinity of an aggressive tiger.

There is again a plan to release a tiger or two in Durrah range, though minister Dhariwal, whose constituency is in Kota, wants tigers in Seljar first. Officials, however, suggest that sanctuaries like Kaila Devi adjoining Ranthambore, home to half-a-dozen tigers most of the time, be developed to accommodate more tigers. Another option, they say, is to remove villages from inside Sariska in order to grant it the status of a national park and increase its capacity to house 40 tigers.

As for MP Diya Kumari's pitch for Kumbhalgarh, the NTCA said tiger relocation could begin in two years if the Rajasthan government worked on its recommendations to make it suitable for tigers. Six months since that go-ahead, the Congress government hasn't taken the first step. “It is not easy to get NTCA approval for a new reserve and the state government should not let my effort go waste,” says Kumari, who believes a tiger reserve in Kumbhalgarh would transform the local economy for the better by creating a tourist destination that combines the appeal of both wildlife and heritage. ■

WHERE THEY WANT TIGERS





BROKEN WINGS
The crashed turboprop in
Gwalior, May 6, 2021

MADHYA PRADESH

Plane Ambition

By Rahul Noronha

On May 6, 2021, Madhya Pradesh's state aircraft—a turbine propeller-driven B250 King Air—had run into an arrester barrier at the Maharajpur air base in Gwalior, while ferrying Remdesivir injections. Eight months later, the state has decided to gift itself a swanky new jet. A state aircraft is used primarily by the chief minister, the Governor, ministers and at times ruling party functionaries authorised by the CM—under whom the state's civil aviation department functions.

The B250 King Air had been acquired barely a year before at a cost of Rs 67 crore. Coincidentally, just a day prior to the accident, the state civil aviation department had floated a tender for insuring the aircraft and two helicopters in the fleet—a Eurocopter 155 and a Bell 430. However, the insurance was still to come through, so the aircraft was declared a total loss.

In the past two years, the state government has spent upward of Rs 23 crore in leasing fixed wing aircraft and choppers to ferry its VVIPs. In January 2022, the civil aviation department floated an EoI (expression of interest) for buying a new twin-engine turboprop—in the same class as its earlier

plane. However, a technical committee of pilots and engineers came in to suggest that the government buy a jet. A provision of Rs 120 crore was duly made in this year's budget; the state government is expected to float a tender soon.

Civil aviation experts, however, are questioning the wisdom of this upgrade. They believe the decision is driven more by the VVIPs' desire to travel by jet than by element of utility. As it turns out, the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government had in its previous term, prior to 2018, showed a keenness to buy a jet. The Kamal Nath government that took over from it amended the decision in 2019. Incidentally, Nath, through his association with Span Air, has domain knowledge of aviation. He agreed with the argument that the majority of airstrips in MP were not equipped to land jet aircraft. He had then cleared the procurement of the turboprop. "MP has

28 uncontrolled airstrips where jets should not be landed," says a veteran pilot from the state, questioning the move to buy a jet. "Besides Bhopal, Gwalior, Indore and Jabalpur, there are a handful of other airstrips where a jet can land safely." "Uncontrolled" airstrips imply a landing facility that comprises just a strip and not an airport or ATC set-up to guide the aircraft in. "The primary objective of the state plane is to reach destinations within the state in the shortest time possible, in response to an emergency. Since the primary use is within the state, buying a jet makes no sense as there are few landing options," the pilot adds. Nor do any of the pilots employed with the state government have the rating to fly jets.

M. Selvendran, secretary, civil aviation, MP, defends the government's move. Explaining the rationale behind it, he says: "The decision to buy a jet is based on the specifications given by the technical committee. We are aware of the limitations in landing jets on airstrips within the state and are in the process of upgrading them."

Then there's the small matter of operating costs: Rs 1.25 lakh per hour for a turboprop versus Rs 2.25 lakh per hour for a jet. However, since the jet is much faster and covers the same distance in lesser time, the state government claims the operational costs can be brought down or balanced out.

The Opposition, too, is not letting the state government off the hook. "A lot of the times," says Congress spokesperson J.P. Dhanopiya, "the state plane is used to ferry ruling party leaders. The state's leadership wants to ingratiate itself with its bosses by giving them a fancy aircraft to fly in."

Other state governments that do use jets, such as UP and Maharashtra, have them as a second aircraft. They use turboprops in their fleet for intra-state travel and the jet for travel to the national capital or metros.

The MP government already has a debt stretching upward of Rs 2.5 lakh crore and plans to borrow Rs 67,000 crore in this budget. But what's a little red slipstream when you want to be counted among the jet set? ■

**AFTER LOSING A
NEW AIRCRAFT
WORTH Rs 67 CR.
AND SPENDING Rs 23
CR. IN LEASING, MP
WANTS TO BUY A Rs
120 CR. JET**

THE GIFT OF REVIVAL



Launched in 2012, Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT) was set up to serve as an Indian hub for global financial services. It has seen steady support from the BJP government at the Centre since 2014, with the Union finance ministry frequently stepping in to support its growth. At its heart is the IFSC (International Financial Services Centre), a special economic zone with heavy sops, including no tax for 10 years and no GST on services received by or provided to firms or their international clients

By Kiran D. Tare

THE CITY

GIFT city sits on the banks of the Sabarmati river between Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar, the business and administrative capitals of Gujarat

886
ACRES

The total area. Some 67 per cent is reserved for commerce, 22 per cent for residences and 11 per cent for community areas. Infrastructure includes a water treatment plant, automated waste collection and a district cooling plant



20
KM

The distance to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel International airport in Ahmedabad



12

The number of active commercial/residential projects—seven business towers, a school, a five-star hotel and three residential complexes

12,000

The number of employees working at GIFT city



THE IFSC

GIFT city's main draw is the International Financial Services Centre, a special economic zone for firms providing financial services in international markets and in currencies other than the Indian rupee

5

The major business areas at the IFSC—an international stock exchange, its banking units, the brokers, insurers and the ancillary services firms

38

The number of banks (19, of which 13 are domestic) and insurance firms (19) operating out of IFSC. The banks hold collective assets of \$14 billion, while the insurers have a collective sum assured of about \$30 billion. IFSC's stock exchange trades 22 hours a day, with a turnover around \$30 billion

21

The number of companies operating in IFSC's domestic traffic zone. These include Bank of India, HDFC Bank, SIDBI, IDBI Bank, MCX, Oracle and Tata Consultancy Services

12

The number of aircraft companies that have applied to set up units at IFSC

200

The number of financial services firms registered so far at IFSC

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY
Source: GIFT City administration

Photographs by MILIND SHELTE

HINDUS & DON'TS



Saying that "it is not right to comment on the past", Rajasthan CM Ashok Gehlot asked people not to engage in debate over *The Kashmir Files* as it could incite communal passions. A day later, the BJP alleged that his 'anti-Hindu stand' encouraged PWD engineers to demolish the entrance gate to the Salasar Balaji temple, which has a Ram Darbar depiction on top, to widen a road. Meanwhile, interpreting Gehlot's words in their own way, the Kota administration imposed restrictions under Section 144 in the city. Following the outcry, the government is now rebuilding the gate, promising to instal idols over it and has removed references to the movie from prohibitory orders.



Illustration by SIDDHANT JUNDE

GLASSHOUSE

NEW BFFs IN POLITICS

Telangana chief minister **K. Chandrashekar Rao** made his national ambition official when he revealed that he was working with election strategist **Prashant Kishor** to bring a *parivartan* (change) in the country and to "fill a vacuum in national politics". In the past four months, KCR has met his Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra counterparts—**M.K. Stalin** and **Uddhav Thackeray**, respectively—and may reach out to more. Will Kishor try to convince West Bengal chief minister **Mamata Banerjee**—who has her own ambitions—to accept KCR as the leader of an opposition coalition? That could be tricky. The Telangana strongman is banking heavily on PK, whom he has declared his "best friend", to work his magic.

View to a Skill

Government functionaries have acknowledged that their skilling initiative has been marred by corruption and ill-focused interventions in the past years. **Rajeev Chandrasekhar**, the minister of state for electronics, IT, skill development and technology, is hard at work devising a brand new skilling policy after Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself asked him to address the issue of corruption in skilling. The minister is also keen to scale down the frequent frictions between the Union government and big tech companies. Call it skilling two birds with one stone.

THE TALE OF TWO MAURYAS



Just before the Uttar Pradesh election, **Swami Prasad Maurya** and half a dozen MLAs switched from the BJP to SP, setting the narrative of OBC anger against the saffron party. In BJP, several insiders had felt that deputy CM **Keshav Prasad Maurya** could be elevated to the CM's chair if the party fell short of a majority since he would be more acceptable to possible allies.

Ironically, both Mauryas lost their seats and are now at the mercy of each party's top leadership. Keshav supporters are expecting the BJP to retain him as deputy since he is still a member of the Vidhan Parishad. Swami's followers hope the SP will field him again in a bypoll.

Unholi Dilemma

Journos in Madhya Pradesh were recently in a fix as both CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan and state party president V.D. Sharma invited them over for Holi parties on the same day. How do you attend one without offending the other? Finally, both leaders attended each other's parties. The scribes, though surprised at the lack of communication between the two top BJP leaders, didn't complain. They got to party all day.



SUSTAINABILITY, PRODUCTIVITY AND PROSPERITY: UPL'S ZEBRA USHERS IN A NEW FARMING REVOLUTION

Shri Bharat Taware has been cultivating sugarcane in his 38-acre plot of land in Vadgaon Rasai near Pune in Maharashtra for the last 10 years. He has always been conscientious about following the best farming practices like crop rotation, precision agriculture, and mulching. The kind of yields that had eluded him thus far are poised to become a reality, thanks to a revolutionary new technology.

By Ashish Dobhal, Director, UPL India.





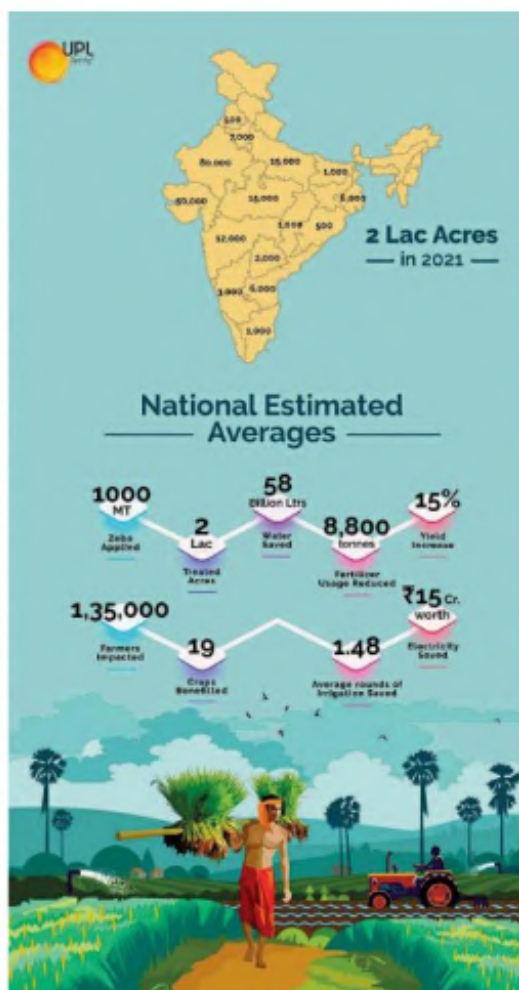
In his quest to get targeted yields, Mr. Bharat Taware had been forced to use ever more water, fertilisers, and electricity. To put it simply, he has been spending ever-increasing sums of money on land that is producing lesser over time. In doing so, he is further compromising the fertility of his farm.

Mr. Bharat Taware's story is not unique. Farmers across India are increasingly having to grapple with stressed crops and sub optimal harvests. A disruption in weather patterns driven by climate change is further dampening their prospects and increasing the risk for farmers

India's farmers sustain India's 130 crore people, while Agriculture and its associated sectors are also the largest sources of livelihoods in the country.

Yet, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation(FAO), agriculture's share of GDP has steadily declined from 1951 to 2011.

Part of that is due to increased industrialisation but a large part is also



down to declining field output..

Like Shri Bharat Taware's farm, Indian agriculture has been far too resource-intensive for far too long. Instances of overstressed water resources, desertification, and land degradation are growing increasingly common.

But a few companies are working on solutions to arrest this trend. Some, like us at UPL, are engaged on the technology front, harnessing the power of mechanization and digitalized connected technology to boost farm prosperity.

At UPL, we are also actively developing environment-friendly crop solutions aimed at boosting the productivity of India's farmlands while putting them back on a sustainable footing.

One of the company's key offerings in realizing this vision is the Zeba Technology.

Zeba is a naturally derived, starch-based, super absorbent technology. Intended for in-furrow application,



Zeba increases the water holding capacity of the soil, improves the nutrient use efficiency in the crop's root zone and has a positive effect on the soil microbiome, thereby maintaining soil health.

It can absorb 400 times its own weight in water and release it as per the crops' need. It is effective for six months in the soil and is completely biodegradable, decomposing naturally and harmlessly into the soil.

The impact of Zeba has been scientifically assessed and evaluated by independent academic and scientific organisations and their findings only cement what we have already witnessed in the field!

Vasantdada Sugar Institute, Pune, a renowned institution in the field of Sugarcane cultivation, in their three-year-long continual trial study(2018 – 2021), has found an additional yield of 8.5 MT per hectare against control plots.

Indian Institute of Sugarcane Research, Lucknow has reported up to 15% increase in yield and up to 7 lakh liters of water saved per hectare in its independent research.

Mahatma Phule Krishi Vidyapeeth, Rahuri, in their 2019-20 analysis of the technology, has reported 12.4 MT per hectare additional yield.

These properties, corroborated by the scientific community research, mean that crops consume less water, reduc-



ing agriculture's water footprint, which further leads to lesser electricity being used for operations like irrigation. The absorption of nutrient molecules also means less fertilizer use per acre.

Zeba was used across two lakh acres of farmland in 2021 by 1,35,000 farmers across India. Crop agnostic, it was used in the cultivation of 19 crops across the country in various agro-ecological zones.

What Zeba can achieve, is by any measure, remarkable. That it does so sustainably without leaving any environmental footprint is even more so. If anything, it contributes to the sustainability of agriculture, breaking it out of the vicious cycle of falling yields and increased use of resources and puts it on the path to ever-increasing productivity and prosperity for the farmer.

The Green Revolution back in the 60s unlocked a new level of farm productivity for Indian agriculture. Today,

The impact on productivity has been astonishing !

- The use of Zeba saved 5800 crore liters of water in just one year, enough to supply the needs of ten cities with a population of 50 lakh.
- Nourishing the crop alongside watering it, Zeba also led to a 25% reduction in the use of fertiliser, which as a result also reduced the amount of labour required.
- All in all, the use of Zeba delivers savings of Rs. 1,500 per acre on electricity and Rs. 1,000 per acre on labour.
- Not only did it save farmers money, but it also boosted their profitability with crop yields going up by a minimum of 15%.
- In total, Zeba has earned the average farmer Rs. 22000+ of additional income per hectare on additional spend of less than Rs. 4850.

technologies like Zeba will contribute to this ongoing growth and make it even more sustainable through efficient resource use.



HARBHUSHAN PANDITA, 42

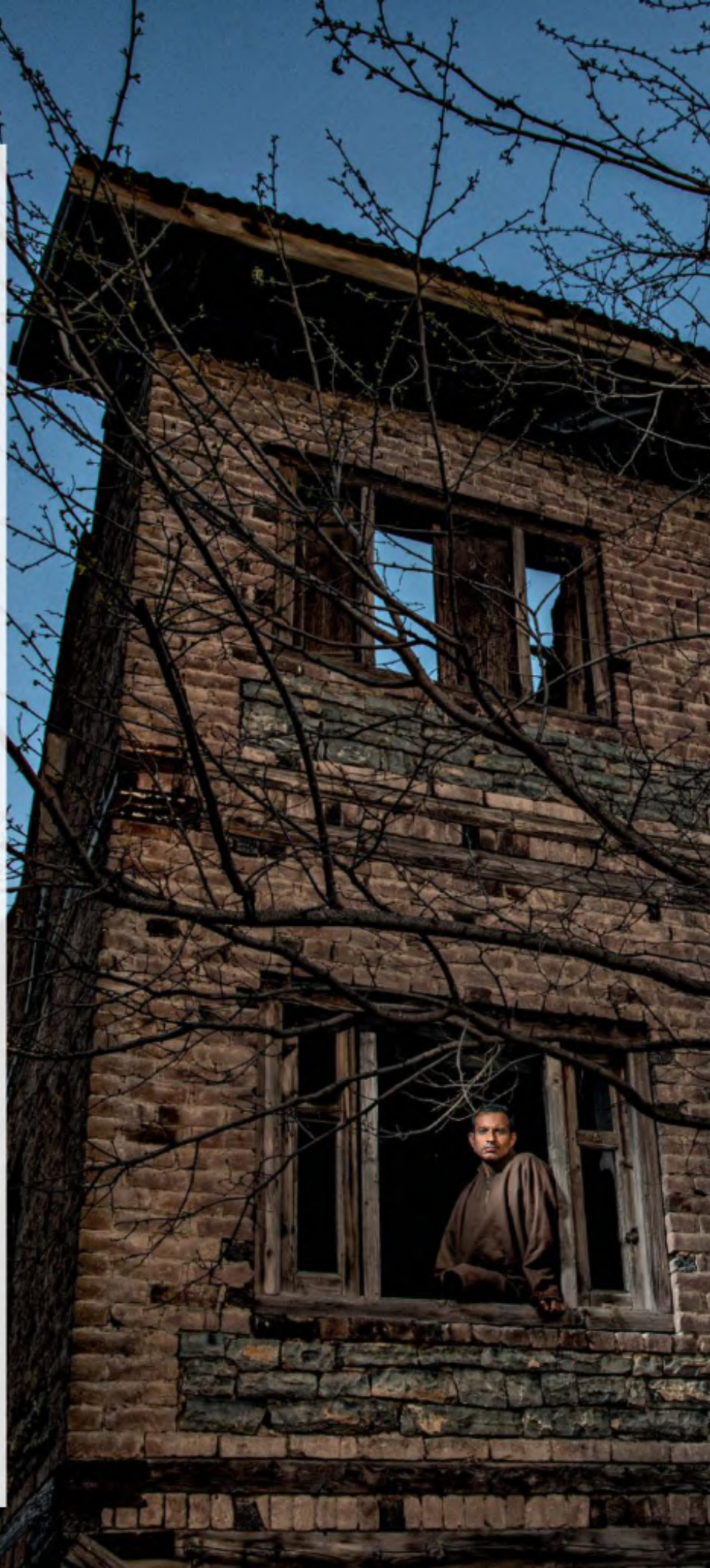
Now living in Sheikhpora, Budgam; original resident of Khunmoh, Srinagar

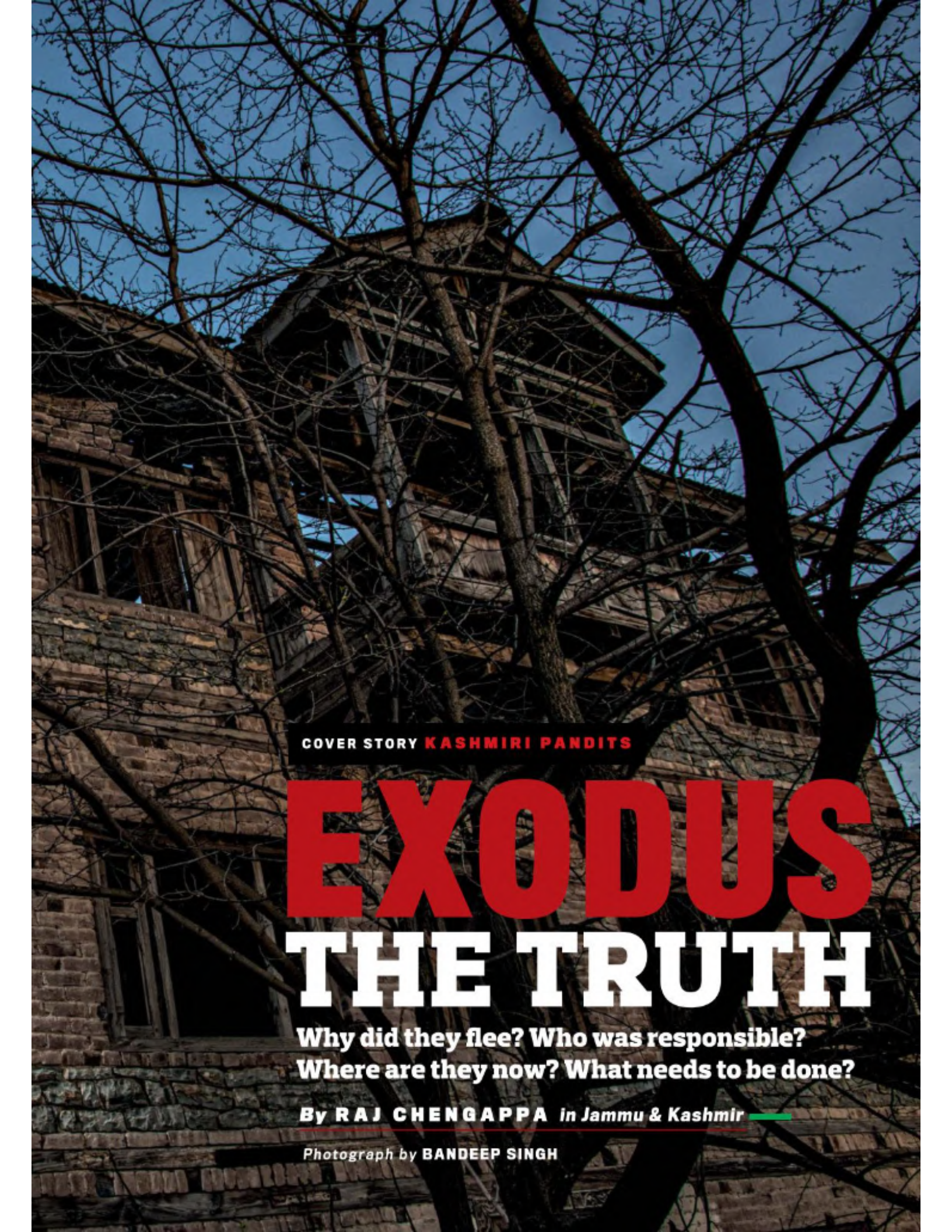
Fled the Valley in October 1990

Harbhushan was among the luckier 3,000 Kashmiri Pandits selected for a government job in Srinagar after the Manmohan Singh government announced a special rehabilitation package for the besieged community in 2008. He was staying in a rented house in Jammu at the time, along with his wife, daughter and aging parents. In Srinagar, however, he had to share the one-bedroom transit accommodation they gave him with four other employees. It meant his family couldn't join him and had to stay on in Jammu.

Just 10 in 1990, he and his family, like other Pandits in the Valley, had fled to Jammu that year, abandoning their 12-bedroom house in Khunmoh, Srinagar, and their vast apple orchards. In Jammu, they lived in a temple before moving to a one-bedroom house on the city outskirts. Harbhushan believes his grandfather died of the shock of having to live in such penury. He himself had to attend an open-air school, but his academic perseverance paid off and he earned a diploma from a technical institute.

It has been 32 years, but the trauma of seeing a neighbour shot dead lives on in his mind. The fear returned when he went to visit his house in Khunmoh recently. He found it in ruins, doors and windows broken, and a garbage dump in the compound. Harbhushan would like to rebuild his house but is waiting for security in the Valley to improve. His parents miss their home and often weep that they cannot return. Harbhushan is determined. "Our roots lie in Khunmoh and we all long to return. We could have made so much progress in our lives there if we had not been driven away by terrorists then." It is still a long haul though for the family to return to where they once lived.





COVER STORY **KASHMIRI PANDITS**

EXODUS

THE TRUTH

**Why did they flee? Who was responsible?
Where are they now? What needs to be done?**

By RAJ CHENGAPPA *in Jammu & Kashmir*

Photograph by **BANDEEP SINGH**

A

Academic Amitabh Mattoo, a Kashmiri Pandit and an acknowledged expert on Kashmir, is surprised by the traction and attention that Vivek Agnihotri's recently released film *The Kashmir Files* is getting and regards it as unique. He was in Melbourne recently where the film was being screened before 200 Pandits living there. At the end of the movie, there was not a dry eye in the audience, with many weeping openly. Mattoo would have liked the film to have much more nuance on moderate Muslims who played a role in at least assuaging their suffering, but found the director had no interest in introducing grey in his black-and-white rendition of events or balance the narrative with any 'on the one hand' and 'on the other'. "For the audience," he says, "the film was a gut-wrenching experience that found deep resonance within the community that believes this is the closest any artistic venture has come to portray their suffering. It was an open demonstration of primordial emotion, purely from the victims' point of view, and they identified with it completely."

Back in India, where the film is running to full houses across the country, the response was even bigger. After an eyebrow-raising endorsement by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the film is likely to

A LITANY OF TROUBLES

The communal violence that led to the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley had many causes—from violent insurgency and political miscalculations to malicious foreign actors and heavy-handed government reprisals



1975

With the signing of the 1975 Accord, also called the **Indira Gandhi-Sheikh Abdullah** accord, National Conference (NC) founder Sheikh Abdullah returns to power, agreeing to implement measures to further integrate the state with India. The main groups opposing the accord are the Jamaat-e-Islami and the People's League in J&K and the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir

1978-1981

Sheikh Abdullah's government takes a confrontational stance against the Centre, deepening polarisation by Islamising the names of some 300 locations across the state. Pakistan's ISI steps up efforts to radicalise the Valley's Muslims by spreading militant Wahabism in place of Sufism

1982

Sheikh Abdullah dies. His son Farooq succeeds him as chief minister

1984

The execution of JKLF militant Maqbool Bhat in February triggers widespread protests in the Valley, which are crushed by the Indian army. In July, with the support of PM Indira Gandhi, Farooq's brother-in-law Ghulam Mohammed Shah becomes chief minister. In October, Prime Minister Gandhi is assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, and anti-Sikh riots break out in Delhi



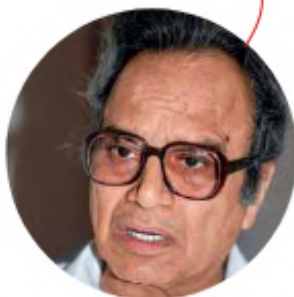
INDIA TODAY ARCHIVE

1987

Under **Farooq Abdullah** and **Rajiv Gandhi**, the NC and Congress form an electoral alliance, while Islamists come together under the banner of the Muslim United Front. The NC-Congress alliance wins, but there are widespread allegations that the election was rigged

1986

Shah courts Islamists by announcing the construction of a mosque within the secretariat premises, next to a Hindu shrine in Jammu. Communal tensions worsen after the Babri Masjid in Uttar Pradesh is opened to Hindu pilgrims. Protests turn into riots across Kashmir, its worst till then; the army is called in. The Centre dismisses the state administration and imposes Governor's Rule under **Jagmohan** (appointed in 1984)



1988

Buoyed by its success in deploying jihadists against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, the ISI looks to replicate the strategy in Kashmir, funneling arms and training to militants in India. Insurgents step up violence in the Valley, with the JKLF's Indian wing rising in prominence. Four men—Hamid Sheikh, Ashfaq Wani, Javed Ahmad Mir and **Yasin Malik**—form the core group



SHARAD SAXENA

1989

Congress defeat in the national election brings in the V.P. Singh coalition government; Kashmiri leader **Mufti Mohammad Sayeed** is made Union home minister. Insurgents carry out a series of attacks in J&K, including the murder of NC activist Mohammad Yusuf Halwai, BJP member Tika Lal Taploo and judge **Neelkanth Ganjoo**, who had sentenced Maqbool Bhat to death. In December, Sayeed's daughter **Rubaiya** is kidnapped by JKLF militants. Negotiations result in her being freed in exchange for the release of five captured militants



1990-91

As the violence and threats intensify and after several shocking murders, including the killing of four air force personnel and many Kashmiri Pandits, a massive exodus begins. Some estimate that over 90 per cent of the community flees the Valley in this period. By 1991, an estimated 689 Pandits have been killed, with about 77,000 fleeing to neighbouring Jammu

1990

With the law-and-order situation deteriorating, PM V.P. Singh re-appoints Jagmohan as Governor on January 19; CM Farooq Abdullah resigns in protest. A crackdown is ordered on militants with house-to-house searches, sparking protests. On January 21, security forces open fire on protesters in Srinagar, leaving 50 people dead in the Gawkadal massacre. Insurgency rocks the Valley, with security personnel and Kashmiri Pandits being targeted. Threatening messages are broadcast from mosques and in newspapers, warning Pandits to leave and demanding that Kashmiris observe Islamic dress codes



GETTY IMAGES

be among the highest-grossing Hindi films ever made, with the collection in the first two weeks alone surpassing Rs 200 crore. Says Sushil Pandit, who runs Roots in Kashmir, an activist organisation that fights for the rights of and justice for Kashmiri Pandits: "The movie shows the raw truth of what we went through in Kashmir, what led to our expulsion and how much blood and woe was seen, which had so far been swept under the carpet, never talked about in such graphic detail. The film strips away all the usual window-dressing and embroidery and shows the trauma in stark nakedness and truthfulness."

Not all Pandits, though, give it this ringing endorsement. In Srinagar, Sanjiv Tickoo, president of the Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti (KPSS), an organisation that has led campaigns against the political and administrative isolation of the community, says, "I do not see any ray of hope for reconciliation because the way the movie has been made it has created further polarisation and is spreading hate. All Kashmiri Muslims have been labelled as terrorists and the government will have to do some damage control. The movie does show some real episodes, but the picturisation is sensationalist and there are many factual inaccuracies." Citing the episode in the film where a terrorist lines up Hindus and shoots them down, he says the event took place only in 2003. Nor were any Pandits killed while they were on their way to Jammu after being driven out from the Valley, as the scene in the film depicts.

Former chief minister Farooq Abdullah, though he is not named in the film, is livid with the way he and other Kashmiri Muslims have been portrayed. In an interview to INDIA TODAY (see 'Form a Truth Commission...'), he said, "It is nothing but a propaganda film. It has raked up the 1990 tragedy that affected every soul in the state, not just our Hindu brethren who had to leave but also the Muslim majority. It

was a sad situation because of some elements interested in ethnic cleansing and who needed to be exposed. But is it necessary to create such hype in the country against Muslims? Leave aside the Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, Muslims in the rest of India too are facing the brunt of something they had nothing to do with. This propaganda will lead to the destruction of the nation itself by creating hatred between 80 per cent of the population and the remaining 20 per cent." Abdullah wants the Indian government to set up a Truth Commission to investigate not only the killings of Hindus in the Valley, but also of Muslims and Sikhs in the past three decades. "If Farooq Abdullah is responsible," he goes

Despite its famed spirit of Kashmiriyat, resentment had been brewing against the Pandits' political, social and economic dominance

on to say, "he is ready to be hanged anywhere in the nation. I am ready to stand trial but don't blame people who are not responsible."

While Agnihotri's film has evoked diverse reactions, what it has done is sharp-focused on one of the darkest chapters of recent Indian history. The ethnic cleansing—Tickoo calls it cultural genocide—is deserving of national condemnation, the perpetrators of these heinous crimes need to be brought to justice and victims need to be rehabilitated. That many Pandit grievances remain unaddressed despite the passage of three decades is a national shame too. While the film may be selective in its portrayal of history and prone to inaccuracies and exaggerations, it does raise several

troubling questions: What is the truth about the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley? Who was responsible for letting things reach such a tragic pass? How are the Pandits faring now? What can bring closure to this blot on our national conscience? Can the Pandits ever return to the Valley and reclaim their place in their homeland? There are no easy answers to these questions, but it may be a useful exercise to begin at the beginning.

WHAT IS THE TRUTH BEHIND THE EXODUS?

The Kashmiri Pandits may have accounted for just 4 per cent of J&K's population, but their influence over the affairs of the state far exceeded their numbers. Part of the ruling elite during the harsh Dogra rule, the erudite and affluent among them got entrenched in the top echelons of power both at the Centre and in the state government post-1947. Before the 1950 and 1976 land reform acts, Pandits owned around 30 per cent of the farmland in the state, in addition to cornering a major share of the commerce. The famed spirit of Kashmiriyat or the centuries-old tradition of religious syncretism and communal harmony aside, resentment had been brewing over their dominance in social, economic and political affairs in the Muslim-majority state. It found fertile ground in a frontier state prone to continuous turbulence and turmoil. That resentment would reach its peak in the late 1980s.

Before the 1990 exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, India had already fought two major wars with Pakistan in 1947 and 1965 over the accession of J&K to the Indian Union and an indirect one in the 1971 Bangladesh War. Then there was the contentious Article 370 that guaranteed J&K special status under the Indian Constitution and gave it greater autonomy than most other states, till it was revoked by the Modi government in August 2019. The political leadership of the state was another vexed issue. Following Independence, it was vested briefly with the charismatic Sheikh Abdullah, but after



Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

▲
PRADEEP KAUL, 62
NANCY KAUL, 61

Now living in Kabir Nagar, Jammu;
original residents of Habba Kadal, Srinagar

Fled the valley in 1990

Pradeep Kaul loves to quote William Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The past casts a long, infinite shadow over their lives and refuses to die. He still remembers the spacious house they owned in Habba Kadal in the heart of Srinagar and the vast orchards his parents owned in the outskirts of the city where they used to go and play on weekends. His father taught literature in a college and though Pradeep pursued an agricultural degree, he had mastered English romantic poetry which he would quote with ease. After he married Nancy, he got a government job in the agricultural department and the

couple had two daughters.

On February 2, 1990, however, their lives changed forever. Kaul was on a tour in Uri when he heard that his brother-in-law, Satish Tickoo, well-known for his social work, had been shot dead at their house in Srinagar. Later, they learnt that it was Bitta Karate who was responsible. Satish's killing sent a wave of fear among the Kashmiri Pandits. Pradeep and his family had to flee in a hurry to a tented camp in Jammu where temperatures soared to over 40 degrees Celsius. There were no toilets either.

He manages a smile at the irony and says: "We had 5,000 years of continuous

"WE HAD 5,000 YEARS OF CONTINUOUS CULTURE BEHIND US... AND THERE WE WERE, SUDDENLY THROWN INTO A REFUGEE CAMP"

culture behind us and all my knowledge of romantic poetry. And there we were, suddenly thrown into a space where we had to get up at 4 am to ease ourselves in the open." Among the first things Pradeep did was to purchase a small piece of land and build a toilet so that not only his family but their friends in the camp too could use it. They moved out of the tenements in Misha-walli and rented a house so that their children could

study. Both their daughters are now doing well for themselves. As for Pradeep and Nancy, they long to go back to Srinagar but their old houses are in ruins.

Nancy speaks little and bursts into tears whenever she thinks of the past. For Pradeep, closure means ensuring the killers of Kashmiri Pandits, including his brother-in-law, be brought to justice; also the government developing safe and secure enclaves in Srinagar where the Pandits can return. Pradeep, who collects rare manuscripts, also wants temples in the Valley to be restored. For him, the past is not even past but he is hoping for a better future.

—Raj Chengappa

he fell out with the Indian government, was accused of subversive activities, removed from power and spent several spells in jail or exiled from the state between the years 1953 and 1972.

However, in 1975, during the Emergency, the then prime minister Indira Gandhi reached an accord with Abdullah where, in return for him agreeing to give up his demand for self-determination, he would be allowed to re-enter politics and contest in the state elections. Experts saw it as the biggest sign of the completion of Kashmir's accession to India. In retaliation, Pakistan, smarting under its humiliating defeat in the Bangladesh War, began nurturing major extremist groups to foment trouble in Kashmir. The proxy war India's pernicious neighbour would embark upon would subsequently play a role in the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits.

Fast forward to 1984, which was a watershed year both for J&K and the nation in many ways. After Sheikh Abdullah's death in 1982, his son and political heir, Farooq Abdullah,

The tide turned when militants got five of their men released in exchange for Rubaiya. India's weak-kneed response pushed them to go in for the kill

took over as chief minister and won the 1983 election with a comfortable majority. A year later, however, Maqbool Bhat, a Kashmiri insurgent, was executed in February. This resulted in a spurt of support for extremism in the Valley. To keep Farooq in check, Indira appointed Jagmohan, a tough, no-nonsense task-master, as J&K governor. In July, Mrs Gandhi, upset that Farooq had spurned an alliance with the Congress, effected a vertical split in his party, the National Conference, and had his brother-in-law G.M. Shah take over as chief minister. Within months of that move, she was assassinated in October by her Sikh bodyguards, triggering a wave of violence against Sikhs in Delhi and other parts of the country.

WHO IS TO BLAME?

When Rajiv Gandhi swept to power on the back of a sympathy wave in the 1984 general election, which the Congress won with a brute majority, he focused largely on dealing with Punjab, which was proving to be the foremost internal security threat at the time. This gave Pakistan's premier spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the space to start fomenting trouble in Kashmir. A senior Indian intel-



Rakesh Bhat with his wife Meenakshi and son Krishna

MILIND SHELTE



RAKESH BHAT, 43

Now living in Navi Mumbai;
original resident of Fateh Kadal, Srinagar
Fled the Valley in March 1990

A window in Rakesh Bhat's house in Fateh Kadal, Srinagar, overlooked a BSF post. It offered a spectacular view of the Jhelum, but also of terrorists opening fire and throwing grenades at the BSF post.

"I grew up in the shadow of terror," Bhat, now 43 and living in Navi Mumbai, recalls. In Srinagar, Bhat lived with his father Hridaynath, mother Sarla and younger brother Rohit. The situation, he says, grew worse towards the end of 1989 when loudspeakers from nearby mosques started blaring slogans like 'Kashmir banega Pakistan. Batav Rostuy, Batenien Saan (Kashmir will become Pakistan. Without Pandit men but with Pandit women)'.

In March 1990, they left. "All we had was Rs 2,300 that my father was carrying," says Bhat. Initially, they stayed in a tent in Jammu and later rented a cattle shed-turned-home for Rs 500 a month. "We were forced to become poor," Bhat

says, breaking down.

In 1997, he came to Jalgaon in Maharashtra to study mechanical engineering as the then BJP-Shiv Sena government had reserved two seats for Kashmiri Pandits in every engineering college. "I could settle and live comfortably in Maharashtra because of the degree," says Bhat.

These days, he is engaged in highlighting the Pandits' plight. His efforts include producing a short film titled *Exodus & Exile: The Need*, which has won 10 international awards. He has also written six plays on the subject. "The government should provide us separate lands for resettlement where we will be in majority," he says.

Bhat backs the idea of 'Panun Kashmir', a separate Union territory for Kashmiri Hindus spread across the Valley. "Mine is the last generation that wants to return. My teenage son may never want to leave Maharashtra."

—Kiran D. Tare

KASHMIRI PANDITS

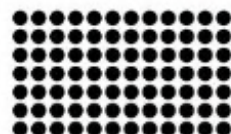
TRACKING THE EXODUS

SNAPSHOT

84,000

FAMILIES

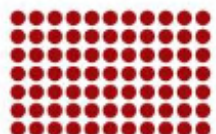
Total number in the Valley prior to 1990



77,000

FAMILIES

Total number that fled after 1990



689

People killed by terrorists in 1990-91, as per KPSS

RELIEF MEASURES

The relief being provided includes monthly grants of Rs 3,250 per person/ Rs 13,000 per family to relief category migrants, along with nine kilos of rice and two kilos of aata (flour) per person and one kilo of sugar per family

44,737

KASHMIRI PANDIT FAMILIES registered as refugees in state government records

Cash assistance
₹3,022 crore

Foodgrains
₹360 crore

Salaries
₹1,157 crore



Total
₹5,688 crore

House repair
₹149 crore

House construction
₹1,000 crore

RETURN TICKETS



2008

The Manmohan Singh government announces the first central aid package to help displaced Kashmiri Pandit families to return to the Valley

Total cost:
Rs 1,618 crore

Jobs for youths: **3,000** (all posts filled)

Housing units: **721** (all houses occupied)



2015

The Modi government announces a second central aid package

Total cost:
Rs 920 crore

Jobs for youths: **3,000** (selection completed)

Housing units: **6,000** (construction to be completed by 2023)

PROPERTY RESTORATION

To protect the immovable assets of refugees, the J&K government implemented the Jammu and Kashmir Migrant Immovable Property (Preservation, Protection and Restraint on Distress Sales) Act, 1997. In 2021, it launched a grievance portal to help refugees with property-related problems

Cases filed
7,554

Cases closed
5,247

Cases in process
2,299

Lands restored
610

(Sources: Department of Disaster Management, Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, J&K; Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti)

ligence officer, who served in Kashmir during that period, reveals, "There was a sense of complacency, with various security agencies working at cross-purposes. No one ever took the threat from Pakistan and extremists seriously enough. Our attitude was that we had the state well under control and all talk of insurgency was fear-mongering." It was to prove a costly mistake. In February 1986, the Indian government

opened the locks to the disputed Babri Masjid in Ayodhya to permit Hindus to offer worship to the Ram Lalla idol there. Back in Jammu, chief minister Shah announced the construction of some prayer rooms for Muslims inside a Hindu temple in the civil secretariat, provocatively declaring, '*Islam khatre mein hai* (Islam is in danger)'. This provoked widespread communal riots in Kashmir, with Hindu-owned

temples, shops and homes coming under attack. It set off the first wave of the exodus of Hindus, including Pandits.

At this point, the Congress withdrew support to the Shah government and governor's rule was imposed. By 1987, Rajiv reached an accord with Farooq Abdullah for the NC and Congress to form an alliance to contest the state election. The alliance won a majority, but the victory was marred by wide-

JYOTI TUTU, 57 RAJAJI TUTU, 59

Now living in Jagti Colony, Nagrota, Jammu; originally residing in Srinagar

Fled the valley in April 1990

Just off the Jammu-Srinagar highway, the Jagti township in Nagrota is a sprawling colony of over 4,000 two-room houses the state government built in 2008 to be allotted to Kashmiri Pandits who had fled to Jammu. The township was among three such settlements built with

central assistance—the other two being in Muthi and Purkhoo near Jammu city. Rajaji and Jyoti were fortunate to be allotted one of the flats in Jagti and moved there 12 years ago with their two daughters. The rooms may be small, but, as Jyoti says, compared to their tented accommodation, it is infinitely better.

While Rajaji was a medical representative, Jyoti was the principal of a school when the situation deteriorated rapidly for the Pandits. Jyoti recalls that when there was a cricket match, there was widespread support for Pakistan among a section of the Muslims. Hindu houses would be stoned if

"WE DON'T WANT TO [GO BACK TO THE VALLEY AND] LIVE IN FEAR. NOR WILL I ALLOW MY CHILDREN TO EXPERIENCE FEAR"

Pakistan lost a match. As death threats increased, they decided to flee to Jammu, where they had to face great hardships. Yet they ensured that their two daughters got a good education. "Long before Modi ji advocated Beti Padhao, we were doing it," says Jyoti. They have not been back to the Valley so far and don't want to either. "We don't want to live in fear as we did before," says Jyoti. "Nor will I allow my children to experi-

ence fear. We will sit here peacefully and chant the name of Lord Ram."

On his part, Rajaji says he had pinned his hopes on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but feels let down because his government has paid no heed to the demands of the Pandits. He says, "I can write it on my hand that abrogating 370 was a blunder. It is no use to us. Many Kashmiri Pandits are still looking for houses and jobs and nothing much has been done for us on these two fronts." Rajaji believes that Kashmir as an issue will never be solved as long as Pakistan is there. "We are not destined to live in peace," he says despondently.

—Raj Chengappa

spread allegations of rigging. Farooq Abdullah denies the charge, but it had a severe fallout. Mohammed Yusuf Shah, an MUF candidate for Srinagar's Amira Kadal constituency, alleged that he was leading by a huge margin before the election was snatched from him. He was arrested and put in jail. So was Yasin Malik, who was heading the Islamic Students' League at the time and had campaigned for him. After their release in 1989, Yusuf Shah joined the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) and adopted the nom de guerre Syed Salahuddin. Malik joined three other militants to form the core of the Indian wing of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). They crossed over to Pakistan soon after, as did Salahuddin and hundreds of other Kashmiris, where the ISI reportedly gave them training in arms and explosives. They returned and took violent insurgency to a level from which Kashmir has never recovered. Farooq was accused of being Kashmir's Nero,

Pandits became the primary target because they could be easily terrorised; attacks on just a few would force all to flee the Valley

more interested in having fun and travelling abroad than attending to serious affairs of the state.

Dissent and divisions in the Indian political and security establishments would only aid Pakistan's malicious intentions. In the 1989 general election, Rajiv lost power to a coalition of parties that included the Janata Dal, led by V.P. Singh, his former finance

and defence minister who had resigned from the Congress, supported by the L.K. Advani-led BJP. Singh appointed Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, a prominent Kashmiri leader and Farooq Abdullah's arch-rival, as his home minister. Taking advantage of the political flux, the militants launched a series of terror attacks in the Valley. On August 15 that year, they declared a blackout day, asking all Kashmiris to keep their lights off through the night in protest. Mohammed Yusuf Halwai, an NC official, defied the order and had all lights on in his house. A week later, he was shot dead. A spate of killings of prominent individuals followed, including the assassination of Neelkanth Ganjoo, a judge who had sentenced Bhat to death, as well as Doordarshan director Lassa Kaul and many security personnel. Both Farooq and Mufti were accused of inaction while Kashmir burned.

The tide would turn decisively



Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

against both Kashmiri leaders and the Indian state in December 1989 when Mufti's daughter Rubaiya Sayeed was kidnapped by JKLF militants, who demanded the release of five of their men in exchange for her freedom. Farooq was against any negotiations with the terrorists while the Mufti, according to one source, was desperate to strike a deal even though intelligence agencies assured him that the militants were highly unlikely to harm his daughter. Farooq was overruled, the five JKLF militants were released and Rubaiya was freed. That a weak-kneed government had buckled in the face of terrorist demands encouraged the militants and their backer to go in for the kill. A.S. Dulat, head of the Intelligence Bureau for Kashmir at the time, says, "On December 13, when their compatriots were released, these groups in the Valley celebrated by bursting crackers. They began to believe that everything was possible now, including *azadi*."

WHY DID PANDITS BECOME THE PRIMARY TARGETS?

There were other factors fuelling the insurgency. Pakistan-backed jihadists in Afghanistan had forced the Soviets to withdraw troops and leave the country. Simultaneously, unknown to many, Pakistan, with the help of China and North Korea, had developed a weaponised nuclear capability in 1989. That gave the country the freedom to launch a covert, subterranean war against India, armed with the knowledge that, even if provoked, New Delhi would hesitate to launch a full-scale conventional war to avert a nuclear conflagration. A third factor was the increasing support for extremists among Muslims in the Valley following the political intrigues and poor governance in the state. Pandits became the primary target only because they could be easily terrorised, and a wave of attacks on a few of them would force them to flee the Valley. Pakistan-backed militant

groups could then be left to create mayhem and declare the Valley's independence from India. Or so they thought.

With the law and order situation worsening, Singh and Mufti decided they would bring Jagmohan back as governor. Farooq said he would resign if that happened, but Singh went ahead anyway. Farooq put in his papers and Jagmohan was sworn in as governor on January 19, 1990. By then, Srinagar was already burning. Jihadists were taking out processions chanting slogans such as '*Raliv, galiv ya chaliv* (Convert, face death or flee)' against the Pandits. Meanwhile, Jagmohan ordered a crackdown by security forces that included search and seize operations, increasing citizens' resentment against the government. All hell, however, broke loose on January 21, when security forces opened fire on protesters in Gawkadal in downtown Srinagar, killing at least 50 people. Now the Kashmiri Muslim was truly inflamed.



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

VIJAY RAINA, 55

Now living in Delhi

original resident of Habba Kadal, Srinagar

Fled the Valley on March 8, 1990

You don't forget the events that force you to run away from your own home, no matter how much time passes," says Vijay Raina, sitting in his apartment in Delhi's Mayur Vihar area where he lives with his wife and two sons. Now employed with a private firm, Raina says he has never gone back since he and his parents fled the Valley 32 years ago. "The mere thought of returning fills me with fear. What would I return to, anyway? I left nothing back there," he says.

Delhi, on the other hand, has given him safety, stability and is what he considers home today.

Raina's father had been in Door-darshan and the family lived in Habba Kadal in Srinagar. A night after his father's colleague was gunned down on March 7, 1990, people came to their home

asking for his father. "I pretended he was in Jammu," Raina recounts. "They were not strangers or Afghans. They were our neighbours—people we grew up with, played cricket with, went to school with."

EVEN TODAY, GAANTH GOBHI, A VEGETABLE KASHMIRI PANDITS ARE PARTICULARLY FOND OF, REMINDS RAINA OF BLOOD AND DEATH

It was at this point the family decided to leave. Raina was 24 at the time. They made their way to the refugee camp near Geeta Bhawan in Jammu, where they stayed for nearly a month. In Delhi, Raina's father re-joined Door-darshan. The hardest part for Raina was dealing with the mental and emotional scars.

Even today, gaanth gobhi, a turnip-like vegetable Kashmiri Pandits are particularly fond of, reminds Raina of blood and death. He had been at the local grocer's to buy a kilo of the same when a blast ripped through the area. It was the 42nd year of India's Independence and Raina remembers first going mad with fear and then fainting. "There was darkness and blood. When I looked down at my own leg, I saw a cylinder lodged in it," he says. He then takes out a faded clipping of an Urdu newspaper that has his photograph printed in it. "I was hospitalised," he recalls. The physical trauma has eased since, but the emotional scars seem permanent. "Being a victim, a refugee, becomes a part of who you are. You cannot ever fully dissociate from it."

—Sonali Acharjee

In his 1991 book, *My Frozen Turbulence in Kashmir*, Jagmohan claims he was thwarting a plan by militants to cause mayhem on Republic Day. But there were also allegations that the governor had told the Pandits to leave the Valley so that he could launch a crackdown on militants uninhibited by the fear that they would wreak revenge on the community. Senior officials who were present at that time, though, say they had heard of no such plan. Moreover, the way Pandits fled, leaving home and belongings behind, indicated they were doing it out of fear. The administration was clearly unprepared to handle the waves of targeted strikes. Neither the security forces nor the army guarding the borders were called in to provide Pandits protection. There was intelligence failure too, whether on Pakistan's motives or on the way militant groups had joined forces to gain the upper hand. Meanwhile, in March 1990, Pakistan began a military exercise called the Zarb-e-Momin, designed to prepare their troops to invade India, and take Kashmir. Seeing the dangerous dimensions things were acquiring, India warned Pakistan against contemplating any such misadventure.

Jagmohan's misadventures, however, continued. On May 21, 1990, Mirwaiz Maulvi Farooq, the Valley's popular spiritual mentor, was assassinated, with the Hizbul reportedly claiming responsibility. It created a wave of resentment in the ordinary Kashmiri Muslim against the militants, who then spread the rumour that the Shiv Sena was behind the killing. The spontaneous outpouring of grief saw a huge crowd join the maulvi's funeral procession. No one knows why it happened, but panicked CRPF jawans opened fire against the procession, killing 52 people. The Kashmiri Muslim was alienated even further and the Kashmiri Pandit again bore the brunt of terror attacks. "Moderate Kashmiri Muslims too were targeted by extremist groups to frighten them into compliance," reveals a senior official. "And while there are enough reports of Muslims sheltering persecuted Pandits, business rivalry and the competition for land also saw many turning a blind eye. Those were truly dark days that brought out the worst in all of us." The orgy of violence would continue for over a year, by which time an estimated 75,000 Pan-

A BLOODY PAST COMES KNOCKING

Born out of the amateur groups operating since the 1960s, the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) was the most prominent armed organisation in the Valley when insurgency broke out in 1988-90. Besides scattered incidents on home base prior to that, it had left its mark overseas with the killing of Indian diplomat Ravindra Mhatre, in Birmingham, in 1984—which led to the hanging of Maqbool Bhat, Kashmir's insurgent icon. In its objective, the JKLF is distinct: it sought an independent Kashmir, not merger with Pakistan. The banned outfit has since turned to non-violent methods of advocating that cause, but in the wake of Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files*, its alleged role in attacks on Pandits has come back to haunt surviving leaders, especially Yasin Malik and Farooq Ahmad Dar alias Bitta Karate. Both are in Delhi's Tihar jail on charges of funneling funds from Pakistan into terror activities in the Valley. That case is being investigated by the NIA (National Investigation Agency).

The eruption of insurgency saw a high turnover of newly-formed outfits but, according to Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti president Sanjay Tickoo, 90 per cent of the Pandit killings were carried out by JKLF. The Hizbul Mujahideen—perhaps the largest militant outfit in Kashmir today—was formed out of a separate pool of jihadists in September-October 1989, but other than issuing publicised threats telling Pandits to leave the Valley [the first of these on January 4, 1990], it became active only in mid-1990, by which time most Pandits had already fled.

A TALE OF TWO MILITANTS

One figure central to the case is Bitta, a young JKLF 'commander' in 1990, who admitted on camera that year to

SHARAD SAXENA



AP

having killed 20 Pandits on the orders of seniors like Ashfaq Wani—though he later said he had given the statement "under duress". His first victim was Satish Tickoo, shot dead on February 2, 1990, in Habba Kadal, Srinagar. In 2006, Bitta was granted bail in the case after spending 16 years in prison without being convicted—with the court censuring the prosecution for its "total disinterest". This month, Tickoo's family demanded the reopening of the case. A Srinagar court has listed it for hearing on March 31.

The son of a mason, Bitta grew up in Srinagar's Guru Bazar, going to a school that had many Pandit teachers. He dropped out in Class 10 and took to selling cinema tickets in black. A neighbour recalls that Bitta's hatred of Pandits ran deep. Physically strong, he was trained in the martial arts, which is how he came to acquire his nom de guerre. Arrested in 1990, he developed differences with Yasin while in jail, ended up being virtually disowned by the JKLF and, after his release in 2006, joined a rival faction against Malik.

Yasin presents a touch of contrast: less trigger-happy gunman, more the ideologue who abjured violence in 1994 and sued for peace, a key figure of the

ON RECORD

Yasin Malik (above) headed the JKLF from April to August 8 in 1990; Bitta Karate admitted to killing Pandits on camera

overground separatist pantheon and part of numerous Hurriyat negotiations with New Delhi. But as one of the so-called HAJY group (he was the 'Y') that was among those to inaugurate Kashmir's insurgency in 1988, Yasin too is under the scanner for the Pandit killings. After the killing of his predecessor Ashfaq Wani on March 30, 1990, Yasin had served as the local JKLF chief that year from April to August 8, when he was arrested. In jail till 1994, he announced a 'ceasefire' upon his release, going against his former associates and causing splits in the JKLF.

In a 2002 interview on the BBC's *HARDTalk*, he told Tim Sebastian that "JKLF boys" had killed retired judge Neelkanth Ganjoo in 1989 because he had sentenced Maqbool Bhat to death. Yasin is also among the eight accused of killing four IAF personnel in Srinagar in 1990. The case is pending with the J&K High Court.

Yasin was drawn to the cause early, participating in protests and pelting stones at security forces. A graduate from Sri Pratap College, he was part of the campaign team of Muslim United Front candidate Syed Salahuddin—who later went on to head the Hizbul—in the 1987 election that became infamous for alleged rigging. Yasin led a call for a shutdown under the banner of the Islamic Students League and faced one of his early arrests. In 1988, after his release, he crossed the LoC with Hamid Sheikh, Ishfaq Majeed and Javid Mir—the HAJY—to receive arms training in Pakistan for three months. On December 8, 1989, the JKLF made headlines with the kidnapping of Rubaiya Sayeed, daughter of then Union home minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed.

—Moazum Mohammad

dit families left the Valley, mainly for Jammu. Jagmohan was asked to resign and Girish Chandra Saxena, a former police officer, took over. It would take several years to bring the security situation under control. Barely 700 families remained. While official records say 219 Pandits were killed, the KPSS, which recently conducted a systematic survey of all those who were killed, puts the number at a little less than 700.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE NOW?

If one thought the flight of Pandits would mark the end of strife in Kashmir, it was not to be. Between 1990 and 2000, the state saw over 45,000 people being killed, of which 22,500 were terrorists, 6,000 security personnel and as many as 17,000 civilians. These horrifying numbers do not in any way diminish the magnitude of the tragedy or the wrongs done to Pandits. What hasn't helped is the apathy of successive governments toward their rehabilitation. A majority of the Pandits had migrated to Jammu where they lived in makeshift quarters—mostly tents on the outskirts of the city—for several years. Cash and food relief was provided regularly (see *Tracking the Exodus*), but for a once-prosperous people, living on alms was a blow to their pride. Only in 2004, when the Manmohan Singh government came to power, did the Centre make any effort, building townships for Pandits in Jammu with pucca houses and also initiating the process of their return to the Valley by providing for 3,000 jobs and transit accommodation. In 2015, the Modi government added another 3,000 jobs to the list and is building 6,000 transit accommodation units for them in 19 locations. "We will ensure speedy implementation of these commitments," says Nazim Zai Khan, secretary, disaster management, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

With native enterprise and determination, as well as a focus on their children's education, the Pandits largely dug themselves out of the holes they found themselves in and began to thrive again. When the Mufti, as chief minister, met

a delegation of Pandits, he famously told them, "*Aap aabaad ho gaye, hum barbaad ho gaye* (You have become prosperous, we have been ruined)." Having found their feet, the Pandits' earlier inhibitions about speaking out against the atrocities they faced seem to be diminishing. They are no longer a weak or disempowered community. *The Kashmir Files* has touched a chord that has resuscitated cries for justice and closure. Their representatives, though, are divided on how to go about it. Mattoo says, "One reason they would want a balanced approach is that unlike the Jews after the Holocaust, who got an

Some recommend separate enclaves for Pandits in the Valley, but the fear is it will create a Palestine-like situation of constant tension

independent nation-state, the Pandits will have to go back and live with the Muslims. So, if the Muslims recognise that mistakes were made and the Pandits do not outright condemn them, there is a way to find space together."

The other way is what Panun Kashmir, a prominent Kashmiri Pandit organisation, is advocating. To have special protected enclaves for Pandits in the Valley so that they can return with confidence. Kshama Kaul, a well-known Hindi author who has written several books on the plight of the Pandits and whose daughter acted in *The Kashmir Files*, says, "We are not just 6,000 Pandits, we are 5 lakh of us. So, the government should carve out a settlement for Pandits in a few districts of the Valley and we can move there." The argument being, if Pandits go back individually to the Valley, they would be, as Sushil Pandit puts it, "like lambs

to the slaughter". According to him, "We need to go as a community and live in one part of Kashmir. In agricultural terms, it is like consolidating land holdings. So, Pandit properties all over the Valley could be consolidated into one place and, depending on the size, the number of districts could be carved out." Not all are convinced. They fear it will create a Palestine-like situation in Kashmir where both communities will live amid constant tension. Instead, the government is thinking of building special enclaves for Pandits along with ones for army and security officers, so that they have adequate protection.

There are others who feel that the younger Kashmiri, who is not weighed down by the memories or experience of living in the Valley, may not want to go back to Kashmir and instead find their fortunes elsewhere in the country or abroad. Especially because Kashmir is still plagued by security issues and a dearth of economic opportunity. Lt Governor Manoj Sinha, while pushing for zero militancy, says he is addressing the jobs crisis by inviting industry to come and set up shop in the Valley. Only last week, he held one such meeting where businessmen from the UAE were invited to invest.

While these are steps in the right direction, they will require time to fructify. What most Pandits seek is punishment for those who perpetrated the violence against them. That Yasin Malik and Bitta Karate have not been convicted for lack of evidence rankles. "People are too scared to come forward and give evidence against terrorists for fear of reprisal," says a senior official. "So our track record of conviction is poor." It is the reason why Sushil Pandit says his organisation is pushing the government to term their experience as genocide. It would require the establishment of special courts where the evidence requirements are different and individual testimonies are accepted. Farooq Abdullah's proposal for a Truth Commission too has merit. It is important that the truth is out so that no Indian ever has to face the plight of the Kashmiri Pandit. It will also provide the community closure. ■



INTERVIEW

FAROOQ ABDULLAH

Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH

“FORM A TRUTH COMMISSION AND HANG ME IF I AM FOUND GUILTY”

Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* portrays the **former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Dr Farooq Abdullah** in a bad light, without naming him. A deeply upset and angered Abdullah spoke to **Group Editorial Director (Publishing) Raj Chengappa** about his version of events, the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley and the closure the community needs. Excerpts from the interview:

Q. What do you think of the film *The Kashmir Files* and its impact?

A. This is a propaganda movie. It has raked up the 1990 tragedy, a tragedy that affected every soul in the state, not only the Hindu brethren who had to leave the Valley, but also the Muslim majority. It was a sad situation that was created only because of some elements who were interested in ethnic cleansing. Of course, they needed to be exposed. But is it necessary to create such hype in the country against Muslims? Leave aside the Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, the rest of the Muslims in India too are facing the brunt of something they had nothing to do with. This propaganda will lead to the destruction of the nation itself because it will cause hatred between 80 per cent of the population and the remaining 20 per cent.

Q. The film seems to blame you partly for not taking any action as CM and, in fact, for being lax and allowing the situation to get out of hand...

A. I don't think it is true. There will be people who will tell you various stories, but to know the truth, which will be very bitter, you need to have an honest, honourable retired judge or committee and form a Truth Commission. Only then will people know who is responsible. If Farooq Abdullah is responsible, he is ready to be hanged anywhere in the nation. I am ready to stand trial, but don't blame people who are not responsible. I want the commission to honestly investigate the killings of Sikhs and Muslims too in the Valley and the rape of Kashmiri women in Kupwara. The time has come for the nation to hear the truth and live with it.

Q. So, who is to blame?

A. Take the Rubaiya Sayeed kidnapping (in December 1989). I was chief minister then and the Government of India was led by V.P. Singh with support from the BJP. They wanted to release five of the people we had caught in exchange for her release, but I refused. I told them we shouldn't give in to terrorists who believed that if the Russians could be thrown out of Afghanistan, they could throw India out of Kashmir. I told them not to do it as it would be a terrible tragedy for the nation and we will pay a heavy price in the future. They didn't listen, so much so that I was told I would be dismissed if I didn't do it. I told them to give me in writing that their cabinet had asked for this, because what will happen now would be the last nail in the coffin of India and you will be responsible for it.

Q. Was that the turning point in the Valley then?

A. The other was the appointment of the governor (Jagmohan) soon after in January 1990. I told all the senior leaders in the central government not to send him as he had a Partition mindset and could not be the one to heal things.



"I want the Truth Commission to honestly investigate the killings of Sikhs and Muslims too in the Valley, and the rape of women in Kupwara"

I also told them they were fighting a war with Pakistan with me as the barrier, but if this in-between goes, they would be fighting directly with Pakistan. I said we would overcome, but for that, we needed all their help. And that I would leave if they appointed him. When they did, I resigned and left. On the third day of governor's rule, 30 people were killed in downtown Srinagar. Then the Pandits were driven off in buses out of the Valley (under the orders) of the governor, who told them he would use force to eliminate these people. But then they might retaliate, so it was better to leave and he would get them back once everything was alright. It is 32 years now. Are the Pandits back? Now they say that Farooq Abdullah is responsible. Where was Farooq Abdullah? It was your government in Delhi, and your governor here.

Q. Why do you think Yasin Malik and Bitta Karate have not been prosecuted so far despite the JKLF's alleged involvement in attacks against Kashmiri Pandits?

A. Did the National Conference release

Bitta Karate or was it the Government of India? And on what basis did they release him? Then, when IC 814 was hijacked to Kandahar (in December 1999), who took Maulana Masood Azhar (chief of Jaish-e-Mohammad) and two others to secure the release of passengers? I told them that they were giving in to their game. I begged them not to do it and said it would be a great threat to our nation and a tragedy, but they didn't listen.

Q. Many say that the election held in the Valley after the 1987 Rajiv Gandhi-Farooq Abdullah accord was rigged and resulted in many Kashmiris losing faith in the democratic process and joining militancy...

A. If they say we rigged the election in 1987, I ask this nation why the people who made these charges did not go to the Election Commission or even the Supreme Court to protest. Didn't the courts throw Mrs Indira Gandhi out of power in 1975 for an election malpractice? And how did my senior minister lose the election? There may have been some malpractices—as elsewhere in



"The way forward is to win hearts. Not a single Kashmiri Muslim will tell you that they don't want the Hindus back"

India—in three or four seats, but they could have been challenged.

Q. What did your party do for the Kashmiri Pandits when it ruled from 2008 to 2014?

A. Thanks to Manmohan Singhji, who was the PM then, our governments were able to give Kashmiri Pandits more than 3,000 jobs that were created for them. We thought of bringing back their families to the Valley by building transit accommodations so that the process of returning could begin. The second thing we did was to increase their stipends, their rations, and make them comfortable in every way, wherever they were. Has the Modi government done any of this so far in the almost eight years they have been in power? I will be the first person to admit that we didn't do everything. The problem is far larger than that. But we didn't make the situation worse.

Q. The Modi government can argue that they made the Valley more secure for the Pandits to return by abrogating Article 370...

A. The recent killing of the chemist (Makhan Lal) Bindroo led every Hindu employee who had come to run back to Jammu overnight. Is this what the abrogation of Article 370 has achieved? Why weren't they able to stop them from fleeing with all the force that they have here? If the situation was normal,

would they have fled? And imagine, in the budget that they presented, the budget for our state, they allocated 80 per cent to security and 20 per cent to development. How much development can you expect with 20 per cent and for people who stand with the nation?

Q. What do you think has been the impact of abrogating Article 370?

A. They said Article 370 was behind all the tragedies and that militancy would be wiped out once it was gone. I want to ask the Government of India and the home minister, who made the announcement: Has the militancy gone? Are people not dying anymore? Are there no bombs going off anywhere? These things are still happening and the militants are coming not only from Pakistan. They are also from here, from our people. What is making them do all this? Why are they feeling alienated enough to give up their lives? The time has come when we must try and find the cause and treat it, rather than allow it to drift till it becomes so dangerous that nobody knows what the end will be.

Q. Have things changed in the Valley since the prime minister met Kashmiri leaders, including you?

A. I had told the prime minister frankly then that we don't trust you and you don't trust us, let us try and create that trust which will build the future of our nation. He promised us in his speech

that he will try to eliminate this '*dil ki doori aur Delhi ki doori*'. But nothing has happened in that direction. It is not development, it is not whether you send us gold or silver, it is how you heal hearts; hearts cannot be healed by making roads and bridges. There is something more than that: trust. We must build trust in each other so that we can survive together, live together, progress together and be happy together rather than create animosity among people.

Q. Does this include holding assembly elections and restoring statehood?

A. Yes. I think this is the first example, maybe in the world, where a state that is supposed to be the crown of a country is cut into two. Not only this, look at the way the Delimitation Commission has divided our seats. They want to impose BJP rule.

Q. Are you saying the BJP wants a Hindu chief minister to rule J&K?

A. They can do anything, let them try this experiment too. They are pushing J&K in such hands that god help you.

Q. Would you accept a Hindu CM?

A. If there is honest delimitation and elections, it won't matter to me who becomes the chief minister because the people would have chosen him. He won't be thrust on them. Recently, a Union minister came to Kathua to inaugurate Maharaja Gulab Singh's statue. I wanted to ask the minister where that state of Maharaja Gulab Singh is. If it doesn't exist, then why put his statue at the entry point of this state? Please explain it to the people of this state and the rest of the country.

Q. Finally, what kind of closure do you think Kashmiri Pandits need?

A. The way forward is to win people's hearts. Not a single Kashmiri Muslim will tell you that they don't want the Hindus to come back. But will this film promote their coming back? That is my question to them. ■

Breaking the Gandhian Knot

The poll debacle stirs calls for change in the Congress. The rebels and others want unbiased organisational elections and an 'accountable leadership'. Will the Gandhis give way?

By Kaushik Deka



On March 14, 1998, the Congress brought in Sonia Gandhi as president to save the party from imminent disintegration. The Gandhi surname was seen as a saviour—seven years after former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, it still had immense electoral equity across India. Since then, Sonia has been the pivot of Congress politics, while her children Rahul and Priyanka joined the power nucleus in 2004 and 2019, respectively. In fact, for the first time in Congress history, three Gandhis are now simultaneously active in poli-

tics. It should have strengthened the Family's grip over the party. Instead, on March 13, exactly 22 years since Sonia's debut, the Congress matriarch was offering a complete family evacuation. "If there is a problem with the three of us, we are willing to make any sacrifice. We are very clear that the party comes first, and nobody is bigger than the party," she told the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the highest decision-making body of the party.

This offer of sacrifice, not the first from the Gandhis, came amid a growing discourse that the Family must take a back seat to save the party from being wiped off the political landscape of India. Since 2014, the Gandhis have presided over a series of electoral debacles, both at the national level and in the states. In the previous two Lok Sabha polls, the Congress could not go beyond double digits in a house of 543. The

number of states it rules has shrunk to four—Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh on its own and Maharashtra and Jharkhand as junior partners in coalition governments—down from 13 in 2014. Just three days before the CWC meeting, the party had suffered a humiliating defeat in the assembly polls to five states, including Punjab, where it was in power.

As expected, the CWC requested Sonia to continue as interim president until organisational elections take place later this year and asked her to effect necessary organisational changes to take on political challenges (a similar resolution was passed in 2020 as well). However, this show of faith is restricted to Sonia. Several Congress stalwarts, apart from a ginger group popularly known as G23 who have openly sought organisational overhaul and accountable leadership, are wary of letting Rahul and Priyanka run the party—either in



TIES THAT BIND

Sonia Gandhi and Rahul
at the CWC meeting in
Delhi, Mar. 13



AFP

official positions or as de facto chiefs.

In 2019, Rahul resigned as Congress president owning responsibility for the Lok Sabha poll debacle, but continued to take all major decisions while his mother remained interim president. His critics point out that two significant decisions—to sack Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh just four months before the polls and appoint Navjot Singh Sidhu as PCC (Pradesh Congress Committee) president—demolished the party in the state. If Priyanka backed Sidhu in Punjab, as general secretary in-charge of UP, she led the party to its worst ever performance here—two seats and two per cent vote share.

The Rift with Rahul

Ever since the 2014 Lok Sabha party debacle, the rift between Rahul and several veterans has been widening. While submitting his resignation in 2019, he criticised many of them,

saying they did not support him in the fight against the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led BJP. His detractors claim he is inaccessible, relies on inputs from a handful of “politically inexperienced” favourites, doesn’t consult party veterans and takes arbitrary decisions. For instance, many seniors believe Rahul’s stand on the India-China conflict or display of soft Hindutva backfired in the elections.

“THE ONES WHO LOST IT [FOR US] WILL EXAMINE WHY WE LOST. IT CAN’T GET WORSE THAN THIS,” SAYS A PERPLEXED REBEL LEADER

The failure of his chosen ones has added to the frustration. In the past two years, Rahul sent Randeep S. Surjewala to supervise the poll campaign in Bihar, Ajay Maken to do the same in Punjab and Jairam Ramesh in Manipur. He also appointed three favourites as state in-charges—Jitendra Singh (Assam), Devender Yadav (Uttarakhand) and Harish Chaudhary (Punjab). The Congress lost in all these states.

Yet the Family continues to show faith in their chosen ones. For instance, even after the recent debacle in five states, the Congress sent Maken to Punjab, Jairam to Manipur and Avinash Pandey to Goa to assess the situation. “The ones who lost it [for us] will examine why they lost. It can’t get worse than this. Can they explain why Manish Tewari, an MP from Punjab, was not a star campaigner in the state and why Raj Babbar, a former state president, was left out in Uttar Pradesh?” asks a rebel leader.

CONGRESS WAR ROOMS

RAHUL'S CORE TEAM

The Gandhi scion's most trusted lieutenants. But even for them, (Priyanka excepted) communication is often one way



PRIYANKA GANDHI VADRA, 50

General secretary (GS) in-charge of UP

Led the party to its worst electoral performance in UP; was the brain behind making Navjot Sidhu Punjab Congress chief; has not contested an election



K.C. VENUGOPAL, 59

GS in-charge of organisation, Rajya Sabha member

The CWC member did not contest the 2019 Lok Sabha election; entered the upper house from Rajasthan



RANDEEP SINGH SURJEWALA, 54

GS in-charge of Karnataka, Communication

Was head of poll management for 2020 Bihar election-party performed abysmally. Lost the past two polls he contested



JAIRAM RAMESH, 67

Rajya Sabha member

Was AICC observer for Manipur-party tally dropped from 28 to five



AJAY MAKEN, 58

GS in-charge of Rajasthan

Was chairman of the screening committee for Punjab election where Congress was wiped out. Has lost three consecutive elections



AVINASH PANDEY, 63

GS in-charge of Jharkhand

Was chairman of screening committee for Uttarakhand where Congress lost a winnable election



JITENDRA SINGH, 50
GS in-charge of Assam

Failed to win state for Congress in 2021. Hasn't won an election since 2014



MANICKAM TAGORE, 46

AICC in-charge of Telangana. Lok Sabha MP from Tamil Nadu



PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY, 49

Chairman, AICC technology and data cell

THE TOP REBELS

Earlier the Group of 23 (G23), they are now down to 18 leaders. Seek organisational reforms and accountable leadership



GHULAM NABI AZAD, 73

Unofficial leader of the G23 rebels

Congress lost in UP (2017) and Haryana (2020) when he was in-charge



ANAND SHARMA, 69

Deputy leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha

Unlikely to be re-elected after his term expires in April



MANISH TEWARI, 56

Lok Sabha MP

Was part of committee that analysed the 2021 assembly poll losses



BHUPINDER SINGH HOODA, 74

Opposition leader in Haryana Legislative Assembly

Offered a tough fight to BJP in 2019 Haryana assembly poll



SHASHI THAROOR, 66

Lok Sabha MP for the third consecutive time



KAPIL SIBAL, 73

Rajya Sabha member

Last won a Lok Sabha poll in 2009



PRITHVIRAJ CHAVAN, 76

Currently MLA from Karad (South) in Maharashtra

THE FAMILY LOYALISTS

Leaders who have remained steadfast with the Family. Only two of them are elected to LS/ state assembly



MANMOHAN SINGH, 89
Rajya Sabha member



A.K. ANTONY, 81
Rajya Sabha member



AMBIKA SONI, 79
Rajya Sabha member



P. CHIDAMBARAM, 76
Rajya Sabha member



MALLIKARJUN KHARGE, 79
Rajya Sabha member



PAWAN KUMAR BANSAL, 73
AICC treasurer, administration in-charge



ADHIR RANJAN CHOWDHURY, 65
CLP leader in Lok Sabha



SALMAN KHURSHID, 69
Permanent invitee to the CWC



D.K. SHIVAKUMAR, 59
MLA, president of Karnataka Congress Committee

REGIONAL SATRAPS

Veterans who are loyal to the Gandhis, but prone to doing their own thing in the states

ASHOK GEHLOT, 70

CM, Rajasthan

A member of the Core Group Committee, many see him as a potential non-Gandhi Congress president



BHUPESH BAGHEL, 60

CM, Chhattisgarh

Insiders say he refused to comply with Rahul Gandhi-brokered deal to quit the CM's position half way through term. Mobilised party resources for Assam, UP polls



KAMAL NATH, 75

Ex-CM, Madhya Pradesh

Focused on winning back MP now. Had brokered peace between G23 rebels and Sonia Gandhi in 2020



DIGVIJAYA SINGH, 75

Former Madhya Pradesh CM

RS member and permanent invitee to CWC, spends most of his time in MP



SIDDARAMAIAH, 73

Former CM, Karnataka

Confines himself to Karnataka affairs; the ex-socialist doesn't always follow the Congress narrative



When the Congress lost in four states in 2021, a five-member committee—which included G23 leader Manish Tewari—was constituted to examine the reasons for the defeat and suggest remedial measures. Tewari claims the reports were buried and no action was taken on the recommendations. Party MP from Tamil Nadu Manickam Tagore refutes this, saying the early formation of screening committees and early announcement of candidates in the past five assembly polls were due to these recommendations.

Upset with their increasing marginalisation, the G23 made their resentment official in a letter to Sonia in August 2020. Now reduced to G18, after the exit of nine members and entry of four new ones, they have reiterated their primary demands. If Kapil Sibal said that the Gandhis should step aside from leadership roles, another G18 leader, P.J. Kurien, believes Rahul should lead the Congress in Parliament and leave the post of president to others.

Rahul's inaccessibility was raised even by other stalwarts such as Digvijaya Singh, Mukul Wasnik and former Union minister K.H. Muniyappa (who are not part of G18) at the CWC meeting. Ghulam Nabi Azad, the unofficial head of G18, took a subtle dig at Rahul when he said the party needed a president who would be "accessible, acceptable and accountable." "The emphasis on accessible and accountable leadership is to indirectly dissuade Rahul from contesting the election to the post of president scheduled in September," says a CWC leader.

The party's central election authority (CEA), headed by Madhusudan Mistry, a known Rahul loyalist, has been supervising the organisational process. The electoral college for choosing the Congress president comprises the 10,000-plus PCC delegates elected at the block level by block presidents. This is the base on which the whole pyramid stands—the delegates elect the 1,400 AICC members from amongst themselves,

who then further elect the CWC elite from that pool.

While this is the procedure on paper, the rebels claim that, in practice, the CEA, in consultation with the central party leadership, prepares the lists of PCC delegates and AICC members and gets them signed by the respective state presidents. The party president and CWC members are then elected based on it. This is why the G18 members are demanding an overhaul of the election process. "The process is rigged to elect a Gandhi as president and a group of clowns as CWC members," says a Congress MP from Punjab.

That's why the real objective of the G18 is to ensure that the election to the CWC does not sideline those who

member. Since then, he has distanced himself from the rebels.

Can G18 Dethrone the Gandhis?

Family loyalists assert that the Congress has always practised collective leadership and dismiss the rebel allegations as a "bogus claim". Seven of the G18 leaders are part of multiple Congress committees, they point out. Azad was the general secretary in-charge and former chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda was campaign committee chief during the assembly election in Haryana in 2020. Former Maharashtra chief minister Prithviraj Chavan was screening committee chief for the 2021 Assam poll.

The G18 leaders counter this,

Sibal and Vivek Tankha will lose their seats by July and are unlikely to be re-elected. Azad has not contested a Lok Sabha poll since 1984. Sharma has never contested one. Sibal and Tankha have lost multiple times. Mani Shankar Aiyar lost his deposit in 2014 and Shinkersinh Vaghela is not even a Congress member (he quit in 2017).

However, there are others among them who enjoy mass support. For instance, Shashi Tharoor has won three consecutive Lok Sabha polls, Tewari is a two-time Lok Sabha MP. Hooda, a stalwart of Haryana politics, is leader of the Opposition in the state assembly. "Any of them can contest election to the post of president if there is a free and fair poll," says a G18 leader. But any chance of rejigging the electoral process is lost without the support of senior leaders such as Rajasthan CM Ashok Gehlot, Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Baghel and MP stalwarts Kamal Nath and Digvijaya Singh. Gehlot and Baghel have stood firmly behind the Gandhis while Nath and Digvijaya are focused on winning back MP. In December 2020, Nath brokered a temporary peace between some of the rebels and Sonia. This time, he has stayed silent.

Meanwhile, the process to divide the G18—the way it was done two years ago—has begun. Rahul reached out to Hooda and there is speculation that if his son Deepender is made president of Haryana Congress, the ex-CM may exit the rebel team. Sonia met some rebels leaders too in batches—first Azad and then Sharma, Tewari and Tankha together.

What worries the Rahul acolytes is a situation where they may need to find a 'dummy' candidate, if he decides not to contest the presidential poll. This is a situation even the rebel leaders are anticipating. Two of the most speculated about names are from Rajasthan—CM Gehlot and his chief detractor, Sachin Pilot. Both have shown little interest in leading the sinking ship, though the family has in the past tried to convince Gehlot to take the post. ■

IN NEARLY HALF A CENTURY, CWC ELECTIONS HAVE BEEN HELD ONLY TWICE: IN 1992 AND 1997. ON BOTH OCCASIONS, A NON-GANDHI WAS AT THE HELM. SINCE SONIA GANDHI TOOK CHARGE, SHE HAS BEEN NOMINATING CWC MEMBERS

don't have Rahul's backing. Elected CWC members can strongly oppose the decisions of the president as they are not there at his/her mercy. So even if a Gandhi is the next president, the arbitrary and whimsical ways of running the party will end.

In nearly half a century, CWC elections have been held only twice—in 1992 and 1997. On both occasions, a non-Gandhi was at the helm. Since Sonia Gandhi took charge, she has been nominating CWC members. The last time she recast the CWC was in September 2020, a month after the G23 letter. Three of the original G23 leaders—Azad, Anand Sharma and Wasnik—retained their positions in the CWC. In response to the demand for collective leadership, she even formed a six-member panel to assist her and included Wasnik as a

saying such occasional assignments (with many restraints) don't amount to collective leadership, which is a "continuous process". One of them points out how Sharma is rarely consulted on the India-China conflict though he heads the foreign affairs department. "Find out how many times the six-member committee to assist Sonia Gandhi has met in the past two years. All decisions are taken by the Gandhi siblings based on their personal likes and dislikes, which then gets the stamp of their mother," says a Rajya Sabha member.

The G18 leaders have been ridiculed as leaders past their prime without mass or organisational appeal and who are seeking official positions of influence, including accommodation in the Rajya Sabha. Azad lost his RS membership last year. Sharma,



CHALLENGES

SAMAJWADI PARTY

➤ The Akhilesh-centric party needs to develop a second rung of leaders with a greater role in chalking out political strategy and tactics

➤ SP also has to find ways to break its image as a Muslim-Yadav party and reach out to other sections of society

THE NATION UTTAR PRADESH

THE LESSONS OF LOSS

The BJP's win has **emboldened voices in their own parties** against Akhilesh Yadav, Jayant Chaudhary and Priyanka Gandhi, signalling the urgency of thinking anew

By Prashant Srivastava

Defeat is an absolute fact, it seems, and leaves no room for grace marks. Akhilesh Yadav may have given the fight of his life in the recent Uttar Pradesh assembly election, in no way humiliated by a loss that saw his Samajwadi Party (SP) notch up its highest vote share ever. But the combined Opposition did crumble, and it was not going to pass without comment. The performance by Akhilesh's main ally, the Jayant Chaudhary-led Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), was indeed underwhelming—for all the fire and brimstone

from Jat quarters in the past two years, the community largely favoured the BJP. As for the Congress, even obituary writers are tiring by now. And so, the inevitable is happening. It's the season for Cassandra's—all parties are facing a flurry of criticism from within, from insiders who see no hope if the present patterns persist.

The first signs of internal combustion came from the RLD. Soon after the results, senior leader Masood Ahmad resigned from the post of state president after alleging that tickets were "sold" to undeserving candidates, while Muslims and Dalits were sidelined.

In an open letter to Chaudhary, Ahmad also asked why the top leadership was quiet on issues concerning the two communities. Blaming both Chaudhary and Akhilesh for the poll debacle, he alleged the alliance couldn't beat the BJP because of "internal dictatorship". Taking a jibe at Akhilesh, he wrote: "The key to Mulayam Singh Yadav's politics was that he stayed among the people. People don't like it if their leader becomes active only during election time."

Even in the SP and the Congress, voices questioning those who handled the poll campaign and demanding a

relook at political and organisational strategy are getting louder. Where this goes in the days ahead could significantly impact the future of Akhilesh and Chaudhary as well as Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who led the Congress campaign in the state.

In the initial disappointment with the election results, despite the SP increasing its seat tally by two-and-a-half times, many of its leaders had put the blame on EVM tampering. But Akhilesh's formerly estranged uncle Shivpal Singh Yadav, who won the Jaswantnagar seat with a margin of 90,979 votes, struck a different note—he made it a point to say that the presence of VVPAT (Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail) makes such tampering unlikely. He also said that opposition parties should focus instead on organisation-building, besides well-planned ticket distribution, if they want to defeat the BJP—a not-so-veiled critique of his nephew's perceived aloofness during peacetime.

Some SP leaders worry about what being out of power for another five years could do to the morale of party workers. Another key issue being discussed—and no one will miss the significance—is the need to prepare a second rung of leadership. “That’s what we should focus on now,” says a senior leader who didn’t want to be identified. “Most of us were expecting victory in this election, but somewhere we are lagging behind. We should understand where we went wrong.” According to this leader, it’s high time the SP went beyond its image of being a Muslim-Yadav party. “We must rework our strategy,” he says.

Agreeing on the need for a second line of leaders, another senior functionary says, “As a star campaigner, we have only Akhileshji. He has to handle the whole party and also ticket distribution. He is our face in the media and also represents the party in the Lok Sabha. How much can one leader do?” The senior functionary adds that Shivpal and other experienced leaders must have a greater role. “Shivpal floated his own party, but he is still an asset for us,” he says.

But striking someone who’s down is an



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

old game in politics, and Akhilesh may be able to tide over things with enough ease. With SP’s vote share rising to 32.06 per cent in this election from 21.8 per cent in 2017, and its seat tally going up to 111 from 47, spokesperson Ashutosh Verma says the party plans to build on it and move forward.

The RLD, meanwhile, may have the dubious distinction of witnessing the biggest gap between expectation and performance. Its leaders had moved with a degree of certitude before the election, riding as they were on the farmers’ agitation, but the party ended up with just eight seats out of the 33 it contested, with a vote share of 2.85 per cent. But the loyalists are holding on for now. Dismissing Masood’s allegations against the party leadership as “baseless and false”, RLD spokesperson Anupam Mishra says, “He resigned because he did not get a ticket. We have full respect for Jayantji, and we will continue to support him in his decisions.”

But introspection is carrying on apace. “The results were disappointing. We were expecting at least 20

CHALLENGES

CONGRESS

➤ The grand old party cannot bank primarily on Priyanka Gandhi’s brand value and needs to focus on organisation-building

➤ Leaders have to look at forging some tactical understanding with SP and RLD to avoid splitting of opposition votes

“THE OPPOSITION SHOULD LEARN FROM THE BJP’S STYLE OF BOOTH-LEVEL ORGANISATION BUILDING,” SAYS FORMER LUCKNOW UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR S.K. DWIVEDI



ANI

CHALLENGES

RASHTRIYA LOK DAL

❖ The RLD needs to evaluate why its ground connect consistently fails to yield commensurate electoral dividends, most palpably felt in the defeat after the farmers' agitation

❖ It is a dilemma for a traditionally community-based party whether to look beyond that base. But some voices advocate that the RLD must look beyond the Jats

seats. We need to relook at our strategy. The party needs to figure out why only about 40 per cent of the Jats voted for us even though we were hoping to bag at least 70 per cent of their votes," says a senior functionary of the RLD. He adds that the party should also think beyond the Jats and find ways to stop being seen as just a 'Jat party'. In the complex caste matrix of western UP, being associated with a politically dominant but numerically modest community perhaps has its downside. Not only does the rest of the landscape unite against you, the Jats themselves have often proved to be not a rock-solid catchment for the RLD, like the Yadavs are for the

SP. It may be time to move towards a more pan-community approach.

For the Congress, the UP results not only brought intense disappointment, they also raised a disturbing question mark over party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi's brand value in politics. This was to be her first serious solo plunge into electoral politics. And even if battling the BJP of the Modi-Yogi era is tantamount to jumping off the deep end, the party's worst performance ever in the state's 70-year electoral history is a bitter truth to swallow. Just two seats, down from seven, and a vote share of 2.33 per cent, down from 6.25 per cent—where do you go from here?

While Priyanka's '*Ladki hoon, lad sakti hoon*' experiment of giving 40 per cent tickets to women made headlines, it flopped on the ground with most of the 159 female candidates losing their deposit. This made many in the party question the campaign strategists. However, women weren't the only ones who lost their deposit—it was a fate 387 out of the total 399 Congress candidates met.

Party spokesperson Zishan Haider blamed people close to Priyanka for the poor performance. He was expelled after his statement went viral. "These people have not done anything on the ground and all the leaders who left the party in the recent past did so because of them. I had not said anything against Priyanka, but had blamed a handful of people for misleading her and selling tickets," says Haider.

According to a senior party functionary, the Congress needs to make serious organisational changes in UP if it is keen to survive the 2024 Lok Sabha election. "Otherwise, we will be finished here," he says, adding that the party should also look at forging some sort of tactical understanding with the SP and the RLD ahead of the general election to avoid the splitting of opposition votes.

S.K. Dwivedi, a former professor of political science at Lucknow University, says the Opposition should learn from its mistakes as well as from the BJP's style of booth-level organisation-building. "Opposition leaders should focus on developing a second-line leadership and reworking their strategy to challenge the BJP in the state," he adds. Taking a leaf out of the BJP playbook may be a good place to start. ■

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IS A FOURTH WAVE COMING?

The third wave of Covid infections might have ended with minimal impact, but doctors warn against complacency. A fourth wave is inevitable, the experts say

By Sonali Acharjee

O

n March 20, India recorded 1,761 new Covid cases, the lowest single-day statistic in nearly two years. Indeed, the pandemic seems to have declined more drastically in the country over the past five weeks than at any other point since March 2020. With 3,536 average new cases reported in the week ending March 15, India contributed only 0.21 per cent of global cases—an encouraging record low.

Around the world, though, the trend of declining cases has already started to reverse. In the week ending March 20, global cases increased by 8 per cent from the week before. On March 17, South

Korea reported a record 620,000 new cases with one in every 20 people testing positive. This is the second-highest single-day tally logged in any country so far. Over the past week, Germany has logged 1.5 million new cases; Vietnam, 1.2 million; France, 520,000; and the UK, 480,000. The global rise prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 21 to reassert a disheartening fact—the pandemic is not over yet. “The third wave might have ended in India, but you cannot become complacent and rule out the possibility of future waves,” says K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health





A DEADLY WAVE Body bags of Covid victims kept next to patients on ventilators in a Hong Kong hospital

Foundation of India (PHFI). While the now famous IIT-Kanpur model has predicted that a fourth wave will hit India by June 22, experts say that three major factors will determine when the country will witness the next wave and how impactful it will be. The first is how well we handle the growing pandemic fatigue, then the rise of new Covid variants and, finally, the vaccine booster coverage for the vulnerable.

BATTLING PANDEMIC FATIGUE

China is a glaring example of how strict lockdowns alone are not enough to stall the pandemic. With



“IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT INDIANS WHO ARE ABOVE 60 YEARS OF AGE AND HAVE COMORBID CONDITIONS BE PROTECTED AGAINST COVID”

Dr V.K. PAUL

Chairman, National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for COVID-19

its ‘zero Covid tolerance’ policy, China had one of the world’s most stringent lockdowns and travel restrictions in place, which kept it mostly virus-free. But as soon as the country began to lift restrictions in January, a wave of infections took over causing deaths again. On March 19, mainland China recorded its first Covid death since January 25, 2021, followed by another on March 21. Compared to this, China had seen only two Covid-related deaths in all of 2021 even as other countries reported thousands of losses in the face of the deadly Delta wave. In Hong Kong, with 20,000 new cases reported in a single day on March

17, reports of morgues running out of space and bodies being stored in refrigerated shipping containers began emerging. Such is the virulence of the current wave in the city that 97 per cent of Hong Kong's one million cases have been recorded just in March, and 96 per cent of its 5,401 Covid deaths have been recorded since February 9.

Experts feel this is due to growing pandemic fatigue, when public commitment towards lockdowns and Covid rules starts to waver. "You can keep people locked down only for so long. After that, you need a combination of public awareness of Covid protocols, mass testing, vaccination and treatment facilities to keep the impact of waves low," says Dr Rahul Pandit, director, critical care, at Fortis Mulund, Mumbai, and a member of Maharashtra's Covid-19 task force. In India, people have been widely exposed to the virus, with the last national sero-survey, done in July 2021, indicating that two-thirds have antibodies against Covid-19. This naturally-acquired immunity along with vaccination helped keep the third wave's impact low. However, as this immunity starts to wane with time and Covid mutates to become more contagious, a fourth wave cannot be entirely prevented, say experts. "The virus is finding ways to overcome previous immunity acquired through vaccines or infection. This is particularly dangerous for vulnerable people, like the elderly or comorbid," says Dr Farah Ingale, an internal medicine specialist from Mumbai. This is currently the case with many countries in Europe experiencing a second Omicron wave led by the more infectious sub-variant—BA.2.

BA.2: THE STEALTH VARIANT

India's third wave earlier this year was led by the first Omicron variant, BA.1. Now, it is quickly being replaced the world over by BA.2. The BA.2 sub-

variant currently accounts for over 90 per cent of all sequences reported to GISAID, the largest directory of genomic data. The sharp ascent of BA.2 can be seen in the case of Denmark, where its prevalence went from 20 per cent in the last week of December to 66 per cent in the third week of January. A study published in January 2022 on the preprint server medRxiv looked at the two variants



“YOU CAN KEEP PEOPLE LOCKED DOWN ONLY FOR SO LONG. AFTER THAT YOU NEED A COMBINATION OF AWARENESS OF COVID PROTOCOLS, TESTING, VACCINATION AND TREATMENT FACILITIES TO KEEP THE IMPACT OF WAVES LOW”

Dr RAHUL PANDIT

Director, Critical Care,
Fortis Mulund, Mumbai,

in Denmark between December 2021 and January 2022 and found BA.2 to be 10 per cent more transmissible.

However, the WHO maintains that the difference in transmissibility between both the Omicron sub-variants is minor and not as significant as the difference between BA.1 and Delta (which a French study in January 2022 found to be 105 per

cent more contagious). The WHO has also stated that reinfection with BA.2 after infection with BA.1 is rare, although it has been documented. "BA.1 should provide strong protection against reinfection. But we don't know whether or for how long this will hold for other variants," says Dr Ankita Baidya, a Delhi-based infectious disease expert.

Although BA.2 shares many of BA.1's mutations, the two subvariants differ by 28 mutations. In addition, BA.2 carries eight new mutations in the spike protein, according to a study published on medRxiv on March 13, 2022. These mutations in BA.2's spikes make it difficult for rapid PCR tests to recognise, earning it the title of 'stealth variant'.

Like BA.1, BA.2 doesn't infect the lungs in the same manner as Delta, but its potential to claim lives cannot be ruled out, particularly among the elderly and the unvaccinated. The US, during its Omicron wave in 2022, reported a peak of 3,500 deaths, the highest since vaccinations began a year ago. "Vaccines help prevent symptomatic infections, hospitalisations and deaths," says Dr Sushila Kataria, senior director of internal medicine at Medanta Hospital, who treated the very first Covid patient in Gurugram back in early 2020. She adds that she has seen the severity of symptoms reduce significantly among her patients and the last difficult case she handled was back in July 2021. "This doesn't mean that Covid cannot still claim lives," she says. "Omicron mostly impacts the upper respiratory tract. The most common symptom is fatigue and often those infected miss diagnosing themselves because the symptoms are so mild. Or people are testing at home using antigen kits but not isolating themselves if the disease is mild. This puts the elderly and comorbid patients at higher risk because Omicron is harder to catch and contain," says Dr Ingale.

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PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

Hong Kong, with the world's highest Covid death rate, had over half a million people over 70 who had not been vaccinated when the Omicron wave began. Close to 70 per cent of deaths in the city have been reported in this age group. Similarly, over 50 per cent of those aged above 80 in mainland China have not been fully vaccinated, and only 48 per cent of those above 70 have had a booster shot. "It is extremely important that Indians who are above 60 and with comorbid conditions be protected against Covid," says Dr V.K. Paul, chairman of the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for Covid-19 (NEGVAC). The decision for the government policy to prioritise boosters for the most vulnerable comes in the wake of global medical data highlighting the plight of the unvaccinated elderly. "In those who are immunocompromised, even a cold could turn deadly," says Dr Kataria.

In India, around 90 per cent of adults have been fully vaccinated and nearly 100 per cent have been partially vaccinated so far. Ten million healthcare and frontline workers and another 10 million people aged above 60 have received booster shots. A vaccine programme for 15- to 18-year-olds also began in January, with more than 75 per cent having received the first dose. The national vaccination programme was also expanded last week to include all above 60 years for booster doses and the country has begun child vaccination for the 12-14 age group. India is currently using four vaccines—the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab, known locally as Covishield; Covaxin by Indian firm Bharat Biotech; Russian-made Sputnik V; and now Corbevax. Covishield has accounted for over 90 per cent of the doses given to adults so far. The government has also authorised Cipla to import Moderna's vaccine, but the

doses are yet to be made available in the market. In February, India also approved the single-dose vaccine, Sputnik Light.

According to the Bloomberg Global Vaccine Tracker, only 1.5 per cent of Indians have had a third booster dose. Globally, studies and

experiences are showing the growing importance of the third shot. Surveillance data by Britain's NHS shows that vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic Covid is less than 20 per cent for both sub-variants 25 weeks or more after a second dose, but rises to roughly 70 per cent two to four weeks after a third dose. An interim analysis by AstraZeneca of its trials for a booster in the UK reaffirms that a third dose helps prevent symptomatic infection with Omicron after two doses of the same vaccine. "Many people aren't taking the booster doses in India and this is concerning. The booster might not prevent Covid infection but it will give the added immunity needed against hospitalisation and death," says Dr Ingale.

In fact, after the emergence of a new unnamed variant in Israel last week, which combines mutations from both BA.1 and BA.2, the UK has opened up a second booster dose to give even more protection to the vulnerable sections of the population. Global indications and medical studies reconfirm that booster coverage is going to be a crucial component in determining the impact of future Covid waves. ■

A GLOBAL RISE

Around the world, both Covid cases and deaths are increasing

8%

Rise in new Covid cases in the week ending March 20

600,000

New cases in South Korea, the second-highest single-day rise in the world

97%

of Hong Kong's total Covid cases reported in the past month

3,500

Peak deaths for the US, the highest since vaccinations began last year

2

Deaths reported from mainland China, for the first time in a year

1.5

million new cases recorded in Germany; 1.2 million in Vietnam in the week ending March 20



“VACCINES HELP PREVENT SYMPTOMATIC INFECTIONS, HOSPITALISATIONS AND DEATHS...BUT THIS DOESN'T MEAN THAT COVID STILL CANNOT CLAIM LIVES”

Dr SUSHILA KATARIA

Senior Director, Internal Medicine, Medanta Hospital

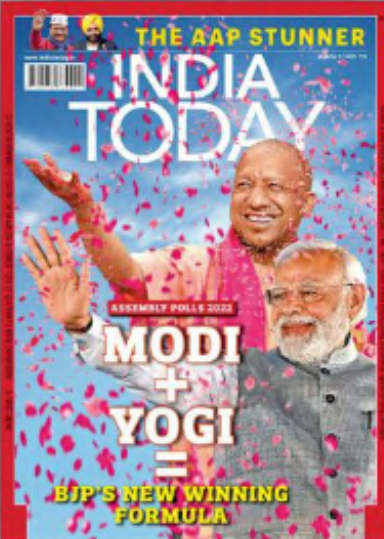


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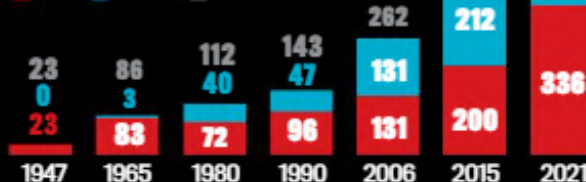
RELIEVED BUT ANXIOUS
A father hugs his son as he returns from crisis-hit Ukraine on Feb. 28

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

Uzhhorod is a world apart, and nearly 6,000 kilometres, from Chhindwara in Madhya Pradesh. Truth be told, you may not even have heard of the place even in India's metros. Unless of course you were seeking a medical degree, and a simple Google search for a cheaper option to acquire an MBBS qualification threw up the west Ukrainian city among the possibilities. At least that is how Chhindwara resident Arshpreet Kaur, 21, found herself at the Uzhhorod National Medical University two years back, and now, in her second year of medicine, was caught stranded, first in a war zone, and now professionally as well. When a belligerent Vladimir Putin, the

THE SURGE IN MEDICAL EDUCATION

No. of medical colleges
■ Govt ■ Private ■ Total



COLLEGES AND CAPACITY



MBBS SEATS

Govt **44,555**
Private **43,815**
Total **88,370**

DOCTOR-PATIENT RATIO

Though India has the second-highest number of doctors in the world, it is way below top countries in terms of doctor-patient ratio



Sources: National Medical Commission, World Bank, MoHFW, Lok Sabha, as on Dec. 10, 2021; * Including AAYUSH doctors

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

Russian president, decided to invade Ukraine, Arshdeep was among the 18,000 Indian medical students in the country who were rescued as part of Operation Ganga.

But though the Indian government's initiative brought Arshdeep safely back home on March 6, the uncertainty of her future haunts her ceaselessly. Will she ever be able to return and complete her degree? Particularly as many of these students were castigated on social media for having brought the situation upon themselves by chasing a foreign degree when they could just as well have stayed behind in their own country and studied in one of its medical colleges.

Why don't these students choose to do so? Students who get a medical degree from a foreign country need to clear the Foreign Medical Graduates Exam (FMGE) in order to register and practise in India. Soon, the exam, to



SPECIAL REPORT MEDICAL EDUCATION

be called the National Exit Test (NEXT), will be mandatory for medical students in India as well. Figures with the National Board of Examinations (NBE), which conducts the FMGE, reveal that the number of students taking the FMGE nearly tripled to 35,774 in 2020 from 12,116 in 2015. Though it is not an accurate measure of the number of students going abroad for medical education, since many of those appearing for FMGE are foreign nationals, unofficial estimates peg the number of Indian students studying medicine in countries such as China, Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines, Kazakhstan, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria at 25,000-30,000.

What explains this great gold rush for medical education abroad? Two things, broadly. The limited number of medical seats in India, and the prohibitive cost of medical education in the country. According to the National Medical Commission (NMC), there are 90,825 MBBS seats in India and some 1.6 million students took the NEET (National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test, mandatory to secure admission to any medical college in India) in 2021. More than half of them cleared the examination. More than 700,000 students, therefore, had the eligibility. But they did not have anywhere to go.

Others got placed in private medical colleges but did not have the money for the education. "A six-year MBBS course in Ukraine costs between Rs 32 lakh and Rs 35 lakh, which includes tuition fees, food and accommodation. In comparison, in most Indian private medical colleges, students have to pay more than Rs 1 crore in just tuition fees," says Abhinav Jha, 24, a fourth-year medical student from Jamshedpur. Hence his decision to go to Crimean Federal University in Simferopol in Crimea in Russia. Ditto for Gautam Kumar, 22, from Nawada in Bihar, who was in his fourth year at the Dnipro State Medical University in Ukraine.

Courses in many foreign countries are also less competitive than they are in India. In February 2018, NEET was made compulsory for an eligibility certificate to study MBBS even abroad. While a general category aspirant for medical education needed a minimum score of 550 out of 720 to secure admission in 2021, medical colleges in several east European countries allow admission at NEET scores as low as 138.

Critics of the centralised examination process—and there are many—allege that NEET has rendered medical education out of bounds for poor students. According to the Union health ministry, 547 MBBS seats remained vacant between 2018 and 2020. This year, the number has reached 741. "Success in NEET now depends on expensive and rigorous coaching," says Dr D. Karthikeyan, principal secretary in the department of higher education in Tamil

PAWAN BHAWAR

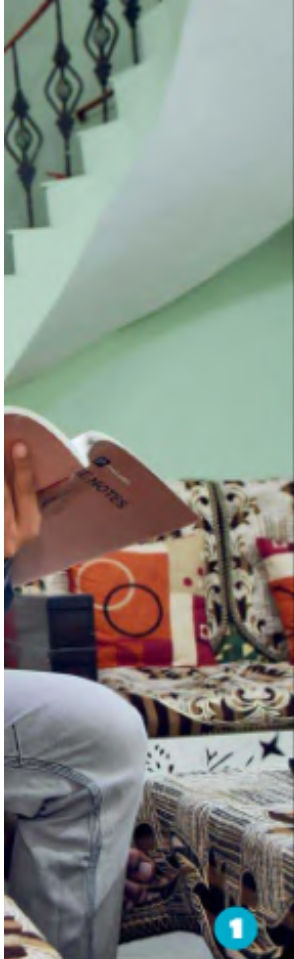


Nadu, and a medical graduate himself. "Poor students, particularly those from the vernacular medium, who cannot enrol in high-profile coaching centres, fail to get good scores." Tamil Nadu is among the states that have registered vociferous protests against NEET.

TOO MANY PEOPLE, TOO FEW DOCTORS

The rush for a foreign medical degree cannot be more ironic in a country that has the highest number of medical colleges—605—in the world. Since 2015, 193 new medical colleges have been set up, 136 of them in the government sector. In the preceding eight years, the total number of MBBS seats had gone up by 77 per cent. In absolute numbers, India has more allopathic doctors—1.3 million—than even a developed country like the US. If you add the 565,000-odd AYUSH doctors, the country could well have 12 doctors per 10,000 people, comfortably ahead of the WHO (World Health Organization)-mandated doctor-population ratio of 10 doctors for 10,000 people, although traditional medicine practitioners may be an iffy fit on that list.

But then we are also a country of 1.3 billion people. The discrepancy was more than evident as the Covid-19 crisis unfolded. China, by contrast, has 3.61 million doctors for its 1.4 billion people, nearly three times what India has. On a global scale too, India is among the 57 countries that face the most severe crisis in terms of



1. DR PUSHKAR DRAVID, 25

Indore

He took the NEET in 2015 and qualified for a seat in a private medical college where the fee would work out to Rs 5-6 lakh annually. Through a career counsellor, he learned about South Western University in Sebu in the Philippines, where the cost was Rs 2 lakh annually. He was back in India in 2021 and cleared the FMGE in December.

2. ARSHPREET KAUR, 21

Chhindwara

This second-year student of medicine at the Uzhhorod National Medical University in west Ukraine was among the 18,000 students evacuated after Russia's invasion. Back in her hometown, Arshpreet wonders if she'll ever be able to finish her degree.

availability of human resources for health, according to the WHO.

In a country with the world's highest rates of death from treatable diseases like diarrhoea, tuberculosis and pneumonia, the dearth of doctors is inexcusable. The regional disparity makes it worse. Four states—Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra—account for 45.5 per cent of the doctors in India even though they constitute only 24 per cent of India's population. And 47 per cent of India's 703 districts don't have a single medical college.

In his paper, 'Aggregate Availability of Doctors in India: 2014-2030', Basant Potnuru, an associate professor of Economics and Business Policy at the FORE School of Management in Delhi, calculates that to reach the doctor-population ratio of 10:10000 by 2030, India will need to have two million doctors by then. This means we need to produce over one million additional active doctors *annually* till 2030, after accounting for doctors who have retired or emigrated.

Given the magnitude of the crisis, the Union government's ambi-

tious plan to establish 157 new medical colleges in three phases (58+24+75), launched in 2014, 2018 and 2019, at an estimated cost of Rs 24,735 crore, to produce 15,700 additional medical graduates annually, appears grossly looks inadequate. The final goal is to set up at least one medical college for every three districts and generate an additional 100,000 MBBS seats by 2025.

Going by the pace of work in the past six years, achieving this target within deadline seems ambitious. Till December 10, 2021, only 70 of the 157 newly planned medical colleges had become functional, as the Union

health ministry revealed in the Lok Sabha. Till July 2021, only six of the 22 AIIMS announced since 2014 had become fully functional while MBBS classes had commenced in 12 others.

193
NEW MEDICAL COLLEGES
ADDED IN THE
PAST 6 YEARS,
136 OF THEM IN THE
GOVERNMENT
SECTOR

WHERE ARE THE TEACHERS?

Infrastructural delay in getting hospitals up and running is the easier part of the challenge in the government as well as the private sector. The tougher ask is getting faculty to teach, especially in government colleges. Even the country's most prestigious medical college—the All



India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi—operates well below its sanctioned strength. Of the total sanctioned faculty of 4,209 in 19 AIIMS, 2,317 or 55 per cent positions are vacant, as the Union government revealed in the Lok Sabha on December 3, 2021. The Delhi AIIMS has 97 vacancies in the faculty as against the sanctioned strength of 305.

Professor K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India in Delhi, has a way around this conundrum. “Faculty numbers will expand when specialists serving in district hospitals are recognised and designated as faculty,” he says. “Shared classrooms through IT connectivity, adjunct and visiting faculty as well as online education are methods to overcome shortages till we can produce more permanent teaching staff.”

Australia-based Dr Shailja Chaturvedi, a member of the executive council of the Global Association of Physicians of Indian Origin, suggests that the government call upon emigrant doctors for short- or long-term engagement. “This could help in bridging the existing gap without compromising quality,” she says.

PRIVATE PROFIT

Many observers attribute the decline in the Indian medical education system to the surge in private medical colleges, especially in the past three decades. The number of private medical colleges in the country has gone up to 269 from 47 in 1990, a growth of 82 per cent. However, with the exception of legacy institutions such as the Christian Medical College, Vellore, St. John’s Medical College in Bengaluru and Kasturba Medical College in Manipal, most of the newer private medical colleges were perceived to be substandard and driven solely by the profit motive. Marred by shortages of faculty, infrastructure facilities and patient load, all these institutes have managed to do is produce poor-quality medical graduates.

Industry insiders claim that setting up a private medical college requires an investment of up to Rs 500 crore. The exorbitant cost of land—the campus of a private college must be spread over an area of 20 acres—also forces founders to set up such colleges away from big cities. This leads to two kinds of problems—low patient footfall and the dearth of permanent faculty. In an attempt to encourage the private sector, the Union government has over a period of time relaxed norms for land, faculty, staff, bed strength and other infrastructure for setting up a medical college.

Most private medical colleges claim they charge much



HALF-BUILT AMBITION
An AIIMS building under construction in Deoghar, Jharkhand

less than what is required to provide quality medical education and do not have the leeway that government colleges have to subsidise it further. AIIMS pegs the cost of producing one MBBS at Rs 1.7 crore, but the student pays just a fraction of this. In a bid to regulate the fee structure in private medical colleges, the NMC has now mandated that the fees for 50 per cent of the seats in private medical

colleges and deemed universities be kept at par with government medical colleges in the same state or Union territory.

However, as critics say, this will lead to private medical colleges overcharging for the other 50 per cent seats to compensate for the revenue loss, and render them further out of reach for more students. “The unregulated 50 per cent seats will now be legally sold to the highest bidder,” says Dr R.V. Asokan, honorary secretary-general of the Indian Medical Association (IMA), a voluntary body of doctors in India. Dr Anup Karan, additional professor at the Indian Institute of Public Health, Delhi (IIPHD), also believes that capping fees will only breed corruption

and inefficiency, and offers a pragmatic solution instead. “The government must announce a common but liberal scholarship system for the poor and other less advantaged population groups. If health insurance can be designed for the poor, why not medical education?” he asks.

Private colleges have also shown tremendous resourcefulness in circumventing government attempts to

1.3
MILLION
ALLOPATHIC
DOCTORS IN
INDIA

आयुर्विज्ञान संस्थान, देवघर AYURVEDIC MEDICAL SCIENCES, DEOGHAR



regulate their fee structure. For instance, despite NEET being introduced as a common admission examination for all medical colleges to check the “selling of seats” in private institutions, the menace continues. In October 2019, an income-tax raid on two deemed-to-be universities in Karnataka blew the lid off precisely such a “seat blocking” scam in private medical colleges. An INDIA TODAY investigation in Uttar Pradesh the same year also exposed how private medical colleges were brazenly ignoring NEET scores by pre-blocking seats for low-ranking MBBS aspirants in exchange for heavy donations.

These corrupt practices certainly warrant more radical reforms than the ones the Union government has currently embarked on, though many invest their faith in market forces weeding out the institutes of poor quality. “The colleges of inferior quality will eventually be eliminated by a process of natural selection,” says Dr Asokan. “It happened after engineering colleges mushroomed in the country.”

Others advocate stricter regulation of private sector colleges and greater focus on the expansion of medical colleges in the government sector. It is, therefore, crucial that India moves beyond the abysmally low government spending on public healthcare. Despite the festering crisis in its healthcare system, India spends just 1.1 per cent of its GDP on healthcare, which has seen only a marginal increase during the pandemic. “Medical education should be heavily subsidised and preferably be in the public sector,” says K. Sujatha Rao, former secretary in the Union ministry of health and family welfare. “The focus has to return to making merit, not the ability to

pay, the criterion for admission.”

WHAT HAPPENS TO STUDENTS WHO HAVE RETURNED?

On March 4, the IMA wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to ensure that students returning from Ukraine are accommodated in medical colleges in India by increasing 2-5 per cent seats in government and private colleges.

The demand for permitting these students to migrate to Indian colleges to complete their education has also grown after certain other countries decided to make special provisions for these students. For instance, the Gulf Medical University in the UAE has announced that it will accommodate Indian students returning from Ukraine. In a video in which Union minister General V.K. Singh is speaking to students, he is seen announcing that Poland had agreed to admit students rescued from Ukraine in its universities. Many undergraduates are now looking at Egypt, Poland and Armenia as potential destinations to finish their courses.

For now, the NMC has allowed the Ukraine-returned students who got their MBBS degrees but could not complete their internship to complete their remaining internship in India. The Union government has told the Supreme Court that it is considering the issue of further studies for the Ukraine-returned medical students. Under Indian rules, their credits cannot automatically be transferred to Indian medical colleges. A similar situation had arisen after Indian students abroad returned home following Covid lockdowns in countries. The NMC did not offer them any relaxation.

Several experts, in fact, advocate against the seamless transfer to Indian medical colleges as medical education in these countries has often been of questionable quality. Only 16 per cent of overseas medical graduates on an average can clear the FMGE examination. Graduates from Ukraine do slightly better, with a success rate of 17.22 per cent. A student is allowed three attempts; if they still can't make it, they can work as assistants to registered doctors or choose an alternative profession.

Though a cruel analogy to use for the Ukraine-returned students, their concerns need to be addressed on a war footing. The longer-term imperative, though, should be to bridge the demand-supply gap in medical education. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have only underscored an existing deficit. It is not sufficient to increase the number of seats and medical colleges; imparting quality, affordable medical education should be the top priority instead. And to have both quantity and quality, experts offer a unanimous prescription: planned public investment in healthcare infrastructure and smart and innovative reforms. On this will rest the health of the nation. ■

The Joy of Small Things

Why even a neat and clean room can be a rejuvenating experience

By RIDHI KALE

If you ask organising expert Gayatri Gandhi how to improve your mood, her answer is to do some cleaning. "Studies show that straightening out the physical aspects of your life can bring clarity to mental ones," says Gandhi, the founder of Joy Factory, a professional decluttering and organising service. Hardesh Chawla, interior designer and co-founder of Essentia Environments, could not agree more. "Cluttered spaces cause stress and anxiety. The minute we get rid of clutter, we immediately feel lighter and more relaxed. It is a relief, not just visually but also mentally," he says.

"Decluttering and organising can help you clear your mind and focus on the tasks you want to accomplish. It is also a way to control your surroundings," adds Gandhi. "A lot of what happens in the world is not in our control. Taking a small positive step to take charge of our lives, like organising a shelf or a cupboard, can be very reassuring." Gandhi is also India's first KonMari consultant, teaching the technique to improve the quality of one's life, which was popularised by Marie Kondo.

What is intuitive is that a neat and clean room makes anyone feel rejuvenated. "Hold on only to those things that make you happy. Get rid of all the other visual clutter. You will see that you feel calmer," says Preethi Prabhu, an interior decorator, décor blogger and social media influencer.



What makes me happy

Nick aka BeYouNick is a YouTuber with 45.6 lakh subscribers and over 10.5 million followers across platforms

1. BRINGING A SMILE TO PEOPLE'S FACES

I am passionate about my work [creating light-hearted content]. Because I love what I do, I have a steady motivation to do my best.

2. A JOKE THAT NEVER FAILS TO MAKE ME LAUGH

My life. My existence. I find [humour in] my life on a regular basis. My experiences are a source of inspiration for me to create content, to make my audience and myself laugh.

3. MY MANTRA FOR HAPPINESS

I thrive on challenges and constantly set goals so that I have something to strive toward. I personally believe that no one [should be] the reason for your happiness except you, yourself.

-By Suhani Singh



The kitchen is often an area that can do with some organising. "It's important to create organised storage in the kitchen so that everything is out of sight but in its place," says Monica Chawla, interior designer and co-founder of Essentia Environments. "It also makes it easier to find things." On the other hand, bedrooms are places of rest and rejuvenation, "so it is important to have a soothing atmosphere that relaxes you. We recommend a clean, clutter-free design and a calm and neutral palette with some accent tones and textures. Stay away from overdecorating and do away with unnecessary stuff."

It's equally important to declutter your closet/ wardrobe. Sorting through clothes "also cleanses your mind of emotional baggage that may be connected to those items", says Gandhi. A visible sense of order is also a calming sight. "Hang the heaviest clothes on the left of your wardrobe, moving to the lightest garments on the right," she advises. "A wardrobe or closet can usually be tackled in an afternoon or evening, and gives a sense of accomplishment."

Cleaning and organising, besides making you more productive and things easy to find, can bring a palpable sense of calm and happiness. Try it, today. ■

Happiness Quest: A joint enterprise of India Today and the RPG Group celebrating exemplary initiatives to spread happiness

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LEISURE

Despite its twists,
**UPAMANYU
CHATTERJEE**
never wanted
Villainy to be "a book
about shocking
revelations"

[BOOKS]

BRINGING UP THE BODIES

**UPAMANYU
CHATTERJEE**
HAS WRITTEN A
THRILLER THAT
BRAVELY JOURNEYS
TO INDIA'S HEART
OF DARKNESS

W

Writing to a fellow playwright, Anton Chekhov had famously advised, "One must never place a loaded gun on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep." With *Villainy*, Upamanyu Chatterjee has written a novel that would, perhaps, leave Chekhov satisfied. There are, of course, the guns that all go off—suddenly, sometimes fatally—but more importantly, all of *Villainy*'s parts contribute to a larger whole—the examination of evil and its many manifestations.

Though *Villainy* starts like so many thrillers do—with a dead body—Chatterjee refuses to reduce the corpse to cliché. Rather than its history, he concerns himself more with the body's handling—its *panchnama* and post-mortem. For the book's first 35 pages, we follow procedure more than we do narrative. Around the time he was writing his 2006 novel, *Weight Loss*, Chatterjee remembers, "I had read somewhere that the number of unidentified bodies found in India is incredibly large. I found sad the thought of all these bodies being abandoned. It seemed extremely important to talk about it."

As Chatterjee sat down to detail the manner in which unidentified corpses are disposed, he also found himself beginning to construct a wider arc: "Once that madcap character was created, he ran away with the rest of the book." Pukhraj Saraf, Chatterjee's "madcap character", has a kind of wanton, manic energy that leaves the book's plot, its people and its readers all unsettled. Son of a prosperous jeweller, the teen-aged Pukhraj steals from his father everything he desires—money, a Mercedes, loaded firearms. When paired with Ecstasy and alcohol, we do feel almost certain there will be blood.

The horrific crimes that Pukhraj goes on to commit are defined not by callousness but his cruelty. Even though Parmatma, his driver Atmaram's son, is his only friend in the world, Pukhraj seems more than happy to see him framed for misdeeds he was only ever witness to. Much of *Villainy* sees Pukhraj and his father Nemichand throw money at their problems, while Parmatma and Atmaram are left with only their wits as defence. The fate of these two father-son duos soon catalyses the action of the book.

Speaking to us from Delhi, Chatterjee says that even while none of his four major characters is without blemish, Atmaram and Parmatma do still seem to behave in an ex-

LEISURE

emplary fashion when compared to Nemichand and Pukhraj. He says, "People in the book all become villains for different reasons. Some of them, like the chauffeur and his son, become villains by force of circumstance, but Pukhraj is one because of neglected upbringing. His parents are just horrendously class-conscious, dreadful people."

Even as Nemichand Saraf's brutal abuse of his wife and casual exploitation of his driver can, at times, seem excessive, Chatterjee insists that neither the jeweller nor any other character in *Villainy* is exceptional: "Nemichand is making money and avoiding taxes. None of them is out of a Dostoevsky novel. They are just ordinary people, neighbours you meet on your morning walk." Evil, Chatterjee appears to be suggesting, is not something that exists elsewhere; it's closer home than we imagine.

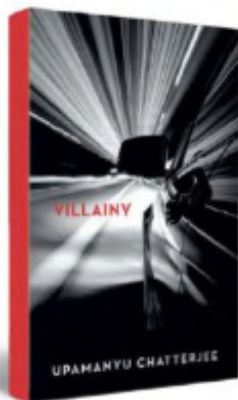
Reading *Villainy* can sometimes feel claustrophobic. Unlike his dark comedies—*Weight Loss* and *Way to Go*, for example—this thriller never pretends to offer consolation. Chatterjee's unrelenting focus on crime and its consequence leaves no room for relief or redemption. Besides, "the idea of redemption is in itself very Christian," says the author. "In India, ethics and morality are completely divorced from religion, from the idea of the spirit." This separation allows even the most pious of Chatterjee's characters the freedom to do wrong with impunity. While Ghazal, Pukhraj's mother, visits temples on the one hand, she freely shoplifts on the other. A corrupt judge is seen drinking *gomutra*.

With chunks of the novel unfolding in courtrooms and prison cells, Chatterjee often maps for us the terribly long distance a bribe or two can traverse. Though he insists he wanted to offer his readers "a rattling good read" more than he did "scathing social commentary", his almost fastidious attention to detail makes it hard to look away from the glaring inefficacies of both our judicial and penal systems. When writing *Villainy*, Chatterjee, a retired IAS officer, went to his friends in the police force with several questions about FIRs,

bodies and legal procedure. "Maybe because of my years in government, I find all that very interesting, and I also definitely feel that all this is totally ignored by crime writers."

Despite its twists, Chatterjee never wanted *Villainy* to be "a book about shocking revelations". He says he wanted it to be "realistic" instead. It wasn't enough to simply send Pukhraj and Parmatma to jail, he wanted to know what happened when Nemichand turned up to grease every palm in sight. "And since the book is set in a time period [1997-2016] where you had everyone from Charles Sobhraj and Subrata Roy going in and coming out, I wanted to suggest that whole aura of major and minor villainy around them. I wanted to do that without moralising or saying how awful the world is."

Even though Chatterjee never makes ex-



VILLAINY
by Upamanyu Chatterjee
SPEAKING TIGER
₹699; 336 pages

PLICIT the setting of his book, it doesn't take long for one to realise that *Villainy* is a quintessentially Delhi novel. Everything from its geography to class hierarchy smacks of the capital. Even Pukhraj's violence seems to echo Jessica Lal's murder. "Villainy in Bombay has been overdone. You have books like *Sacred Games* and *Shantaram* already. I'm totally Bengali at heart, but I don't know Calcutta very well. Also, this is a very North Indian novel and I grew up here."

Having now moved base to Sri Lanka, Chatterjee, 62, fits somewhat perfectly that image of reclusive writer. "I know nobody in Colombo. At one level, that's a conscious choice, but on another level, one can't make friends after a certain age. Not having friends, I find, leaves you with ideal working conditions." With fewer distractions, Chatterjee released *The Assassination of Indira Gandhi*, a collected volume of short stories, in 2019. He has followed that up with *Villainy* and is now already deep into his next.

Besides single-minded focus, Chatterjee agrees that living in Sri Lanka also gives him objectivity. "It's a good feeling to step away from your subject matter, sit some distance away and look back." Not everything about Sri Lanka, though, is idyllic. What irks Chatterjee is his reliance on the internet. "Your major source of information becomes YouTube and all that rubbish. The internet can be extremely unreliable. It's only on your visits to India that you are able to talk to friends and get a sense of what's really going on." Chatterjee's continuing interest in India should be a source of comfort. If *Villainy* is anything to go by, few other writers dare to travel to the heart of this nation's darkness so fearlessly. ■

—Shreevatsa Nevatia



BIRDWATCHING
by Stephen
Alter
ALEPH BOOK
COMPANY
₹799;
351 pages

BOOKS

FROM COVER TO UNDERCOVER

Set against the backdrop of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, Stephen Alter's new spy novel proves too riveting to put down

In the midst of the threat of a thermo-nuclear war clouding the horizon, it seems almost futile to suggest that out there on the forested slopes of the Himalayas there are birds foraging for their future. Yet such is the compelling power of Stephen Alter's latest invocation of the past in his tangentially named *Birdwatching* that you are inextricably drawn into his web of stories. Let us admit that he belongs to the John Masters tribe of storytellers, but with a Harrison Ford type of mediation and derring-do to venture forth in situations where others have dared and failed.

Being the son of American missionaries who settled long ago in Mussoorie, Uttarakhand, Alter has a mystical attachment to the region that goes beyond boundaries. In that he is most like another partisan interlocutor, Nari Rustomji ICS. In his 1971 account, *Enchanted Frontiers: Sikkim, Bhutan and India's North-East Borderlands*, Rustomji identified himself so thoroughly with the people of the area, he used to say: "I am very much a tribal myself."

Alter, on the other hand, is more at home in the wilderness. One of his best-known works, *Becoming a Mountain: Himalayan Journeys in Search of the Sacred and the Sublime* (2014), captures the ease in which his hero Guy Fletcher, a rookie American ornithologist, hurtles across the same terrain just before the 1962 Sino-Indian war as a newly-recruited spy for the CIA. Some of the most delightful aspects of the novel are

the introductory paragraphs that head each chapter, detailing the plumage and mating calls of a diverse number of avian species both in India, the US and even in Bangkok, where Fletcher sees the Vietcong getting restive. Commies are still hiding under every bed.

Needless to add, every Fletcher needs a friend who will fetch and carry him through the longer treks and dangerous reconnoitres into enemy territory. He is the splendid Captain Imtiaz Afridi of the intelligence wing of the Indian Army. They are not just brothers who bivouac together but lovers who share the affections of the sensuously endowed Kesang Sherpa, educated at Calcutta's Loretto Convent. She is efficient both in bed and out of it and one might even say, quite in advance of the times.

What makes Stephen Alter's account so riveting is the way he includes real-life events and describes the social setting with an eye to detail. We might know the eventual outcome but he still keeps us turning the page. There are brilliant vignettes of Jacqueline Kennedy's 1962 visit to Delhi, of being courted by Pandit Nehru; of Hope Cook, the American ingenue, imitating Jackie's whispery voice

and white gloved hands marrying the Prince of Sikkim in 1963. Set against the Bay of Pigs disaster in 1961, Alter then fast forwards the events of *Birdwatching* to coincide with the Sino-India war of November 1962. And when all else fails, there is birdsong and the splendour of the snows of Kanchenjunga. ■

—Geeta Doctor

What makes
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setting of the time

SPORTS

SHOOTING FOR THE STARS

Having won three medals at the recent ISSF World Cup, **Esha Singh**, 17, is now the shooter to beat

Esha Singh was 10 when she first visited shooter Gagan Narang's Gun for Glory Shooting Academy in Pune. Walking around the facility, she noticed posters of Narang flashing his 2012 Olympic bronze medal. "I remember thinking, 'Wow, it would be so nice to win an Olympic medal and have my photos everywhere.' Over time, I got very interested in the journey to the Olympics—like working really hard and achieving things along the way," Singh, now 17, says.

Earlier this month, Singh proved she didn't just have the ambition required for Olympic glory but also the skill. The ISSF World Cup in Cairo was the pistol shooter's first senior international championship. India topped the standings with seven medals—Singh picked up three—two golds (10m and 25m team events) and a silver (10m individual event). "It was really hectic since I was part of six events. There wasn't a single break day, so I would rest whenever possible and eat and hydrate well. And, of course, enjoy my World Cup debut," she says.

As a child, Singh was exposed to a number of sports by her father, Sachin, a former rally driver. Just months after picking up a pistol, Singh, then only 10, took gold at a state level meet. "Dad always knew that pursuing a sport means you will be disciplined all your life. Mom, on the other hand, couldn't get over the fact that I had picked up yet another sport. She was the one who would take me to multiple classes," Singh says, laughing. "Back then, nobody expected me to take shooting so seriously." Once Singh's

ESHA SINGH holds up one of her gold medals from her wins at the ISSF World Cup in Cairo



commitment was beyond doubt, her father built her a shooting range at home. She continues to train there even today. "Shooting has taught me to be more patient and I have come to realise how important it is to control your mind. It is just something I have learnt from experience," she adds.

Of the many things Singh has to look forward to in her future, the first is a driving licence. She remembers going on long drives as a three-year-old, sitting pretty in her dad's lap, pretending to drive on her own. "Dad allows me to drive in parking lots these days. I just love how it feels. He had told me he will get me into rallying once I turn 18, but honestly, I do not know if I will have the time," says Singh. ■

—Shail Desai



MIND OVER MATTER

Pravin Tambe made headlines when he made his IPL debut at the age of 41. The Maharashtrian player was soon approached by Sudip Tewari of Bootroom Sports Media to make a film on his inspiring journey. "I was surprised because I felt I hadn't accomplished much," says Tambe. On April 1, Disney+ Hotstar releases Kaun Pravin Tambe? in which Shreyas Talpade plays the cricketer who is now a part of Kolkata Knight Riders' coaching staff.

Excerpts from an interview:

Q By 41, most players have given up the dream of playing professional cricket but not you...

My passion for cricket kept me going. Whenever I had time, I would play cricket and I wanted to play well. I never factored in my age while doing so. I knew I could field or catch regardless of it, so I didn't let it bother me when people doubted me. Nothing comes easy in life. I put in the work. I made it a point to balance my work and cricket.

LEISURE

In the middle of our interview, Nikhat Zareen talks about how she recently wrote a list of 10 things she wanted to eat after the Asian Games trials. "Butter naan, butter chicken, rumali roti, chicken 65, shezwan vada pav, pani puri, momos, pasta," she rattles off. Having now secured her spot at the Asian Games

(51kg category) and also the IBA Women's World Boxing Championship (52kg), Zareen, 25, has a small window in which she can enjoy all of Delhi's finest fast food. In no time, the flyweight boxing champion will be switching back to a diet of chicken, salads, rotis, and intense training sessions twice a day.

For Zareen, 2022 has begun with a bang. After recovering from Covid in January, she won her second gold medal at the 73rd Strandja Memorial Boxing Tournament in Bulgaria last month. She recalls with relish how she beat Tokyo Olympic silver medalist Buse Naz Çakıroğlu, who had defeated her at the Bosphorus Tournament in Turkey last year. "It was sweet revenge," she says.

Zareen says she now likes to confuse her opponents by not looking them in the eye. "I look at their gloves...they won't be able

to understand what is going on in my mind." Her mantra is to remain calm and composed, without losing her aggressive edge. Opponents, she says, once won games against her by clinching, holding and throwing punches while she did nothing: "That gave the judges the impression that I am weak. Now if any boxer tries to hold me, I give it back, tit for tat." Right now, Zareen has her sights trained on the Paris Olympics 2024. "I imagine myself standing on the podium at the Paris Olympics with the gold medal," she says. "The mind is everything—what you think will happen."

Known as 'Bushra' to friends and family in Nizamabad, Zareen says her successes in the boxing ring have led to changes outside of it. "At first, people used to ask my father why I'm boxing in spite of being a girl. They would say no one will marry me if my face gets ruined. Now, they call my parents and ask, 'When is Bushra coming? Bring her home'. It is nice to see I have at least changed people's mentality." Sport, it is clear, has afforded Zareen a rare freedom: "I'm lucky to live this life because where I come from, young women are already married with at least three kids. I am grateful I live life to the fullest." ■

—Anu Prabhakar

SPORTS

No Boxing Her In

As she keeps succeeding in the ring, boxer Nikhat Zareen is also busy changing mindsets outside of it



After her many wins in 2022, 25-year-old boxer **NIKHAT ZAREEN** is being looked at as a successor to Mary Kom

Q. Has the IPL been a boon for cricketers, as your story suggests?
Definitely! It changed my life. My salary increased, I got national recognition and got to play with the best. If you do well, you get more opportunities. It was after my performance in the IPL that I got to play in the

Ranji Trophy.

Q. What does it take to have a long career in sport?

They say you have to train your body, but I was always training my mind. If I send it a message, like I want to run for an hour, then I will do it. Even if I am tired, I focus and push myself. I don't let anything stop me.

ON REEL

Shreyas Talpade in *Kaun Pravin Tambe?*

you are today?

Whatever I am right now is because of him. When I went for selection trials for Rajasthan Royals, everyone was asking my age. He, however, the team captain then, never did. I bowled and fielded wherever he wanted me to and I got selected. It was a dream to be in the same dressing room as him. The Indian cricket team is in great hands. ■

—with Suhani Singh



F&B

Lifting Our Spirits

Whisky clubs in India are fostering a sense of community and awareness among both novices and connoisseurs



India, history and statistics both suggest, has loved whisky ever since the British introduced us to it. Nothing—not our thriving wine industry nor the current craft gin revolution—has dented its popularity. Be it Scotch, blended whiskies, bourbons or Japanese malts, Indians are today drinking more whisky than ever. Over the past few years, Indian single malts have also carved a sizeable niche for themselves, with brands like Amrut, Paul John, Rampur et al holding their own against imported whiskies. “Indians are drinking better and there’s a clear trend towards single malts. People are also far more aware and educated about brands than before,” says sommelier Nikhil Agarwal, CEO of All Things Nice (allthingsnice.in), a luxury wine and spirits consulting agency that curates experiential events such as whisky-cigar pairings, blind tastings, jazz and whisky evenings.

All Things Nice is by no means

the only Indian outfit shouldering that sometimes heavy mantle of awareness. The Dram Club (thedramclub.in), too, organises masterclasses and whisky pairings. The whisky club recently hosted a private tasting of whiskies from the Glendronach distillery for the first time in India. Co-founder Swati Sharma says, “During our trips abroad, we found many whisky groups that were friendly and welcoming, but the ones in Mumbai were rather close and restrictive. Our idea was to make whisky fun, inclusive and

THE EVENTS AND TASTINGS ORGANISED BY INDIA'S WHISKY CLUBS ARE BRINGING IN A YOUNGER CLIENTELE



democratic, appreciating the liquid for what it truly is and looking beyond the label on the bottle.” In an effort to help consumers select the best whisky, Dram Club has also launched an app. “While most whiskies featured on the app have been reviewed by us, app users have also begun adding their reviews, making it an independent space in which you can discover whiskies”, says co-founder Vinayak Singh.

In Bengaluru, the decade-old Single Malt Amateur Club (smacindia.com) has been a platform for amateurs, professionals,

SETTING THE BAR HIGH ▶ Best whisky bars in India



BASTIAN, Mumbai

The spacious Bastian in Worli has a huge collection of whiskies, with something for every budget. Their expert mixologist also comes up with fantastic whisky cocktails like Appleberry Rocks (bourbon, fresh apples, and raspberry puree).

THE COLLECTION, Bengaluru



If you are in Bengaluru, wanting to sample a curated assortment of whiskies from around the world, head to The Collection at Four Seasons Hotel. Here you will also find sumptuous signature cocktails.



SARANG GUPTA

and connoisseurs to share their single malt experiences and information. Meanwhile, in Kolkata, The Calcutta Malt and Spirits Club organises monthly sessions for its members to discuss three malts from different regions of Scotland. Though all four clubs offer free membership, individual events are often ticketed, with prices ranging from Rs 2,000 to Rs 7,000.

"We do exclusive bottlings and curate whisky tours as well. We are the only club in India with exclusive bottlings for members based on their palate preferences", says Harsha Thimmaiah, partner at Single Malt Amateur Club. Other clubs are also trying hard to exceed the tasting brief. In February 2020, The Dram Club hosted the India leg of the 20-year-old Speyside Whisky Festival, while All Things Nice

SWISH & SNIFF Whisky tasting events organised by (clockwise from left) The Dram Club; Single Malt Amateur Club; and All Things Nice



has organised its own high-profile events, once bringing the legendary whisky expert Jim Murray to India. It also educates on scotch whisky through its exclusive affiliation with the Edinburgh Whisky Academy in Scotland.

The membership profile of these clubs reflects the changing face of the Indian whisky consumer. "Right from the beginning, women comprised about 25 per cent of our members and this number has steadily grown to 40 per cent. Also, over the past two years, we have seen many whisky and spirits enthusiasts in the 25-35 age group join our events and tastings. Initially, it was mostly people 35 years and above," says Sharma. All we can say is "Slàinte Mhath" (good health in Gaelic, pronounced Slanj-a-va). ■

—Prachi Joshi



WHISKY SAMBA Gurugram

Whisky Samba offers 'whisky flights' or samplers, by region, as well as flavour profiles, so you can experiment with different styles of whisky.

FRESH OFF THE CASK

Best new Indian whiskies

INDRI

Named after the distillery's location below the Himalayan foothills, Indri is a delightfully layered and rich whisky with hints of black tea and caramelised pineapple. Gentle spice and nutty flavours lead to a subtle yet long finish.



KAMET

Inspired by one of the highest peaks in India, Kamet is a premium single malt distilled from the indigenous six-row barley. It is matured in a combination of ex-bourbon, ex-wine, and ex-sherry casks, giving it oaky, spice-forward notes and a complex nutty finish.



MITHUNA BY PAUL JOHN

A nuanced and intense Indian single malt, Paul John's Mithuna has been matured in American virgin oak casks and finished in ex-bourbon casks. On the nose, you have liquorice, honey and vanilla, with flavours of orange peel and dark cocoa tones.



KEEPING IT REAL

At 87, **Shyam Benegal** still has many stories to tell. As he prepares for the release of his latest film, *Mujib: The Making of a Nation*, a Sheikh Mujibur Rahman biopic, the veteran filmmaker talks about his thirst for knowledge and what keeps him going.

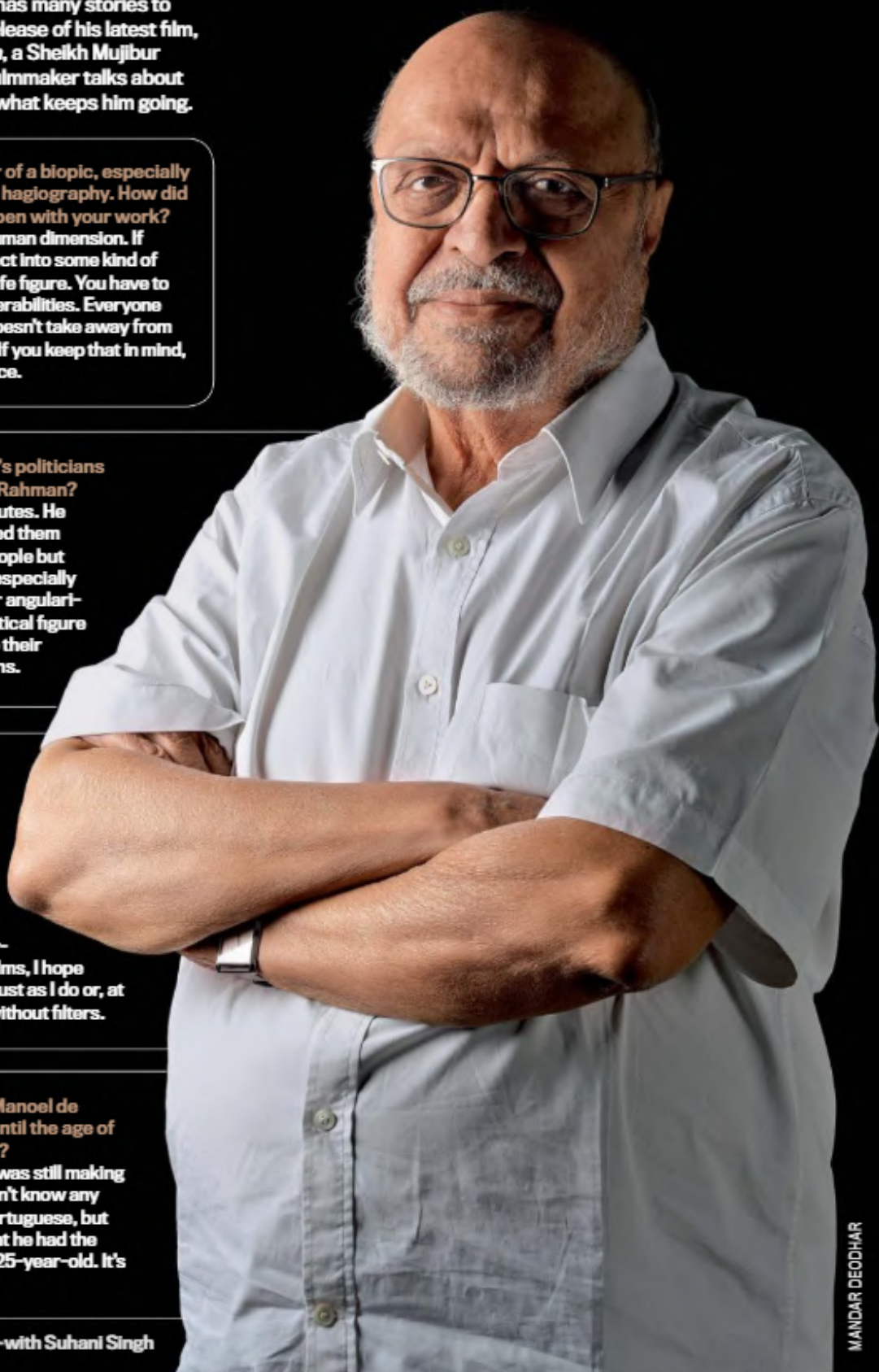
Q. There's always a danger of a biopic, especially a political one, becoming a hagiography. How did you ensure that didn't happen with your work? You should never lose the human dimension. If you do, you make your subject into some kind of a superman, a larger-than-life figure. You have to see a person with their vulnerabilities. Everyone has an Achilles heel, but it doesn't take away from their capability or strength. If you keep that in mind, everything else falls into place.

Q. What lessons can today's politicians learn from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman? I'll start with his good attributes. He loved his people, but he loved them too much. He trusted his people but he trusted them too much, especially his aides. He didn't see their angularities. It's important for a political figure to know that they, too, have their weaknesses and temptations.

Q. Apart from hard-hitting social dramas, political history is your forte. What draws you to these subjects? One of my primary interests is finding out everything I possibly can about my country. One is forever learning. Through my films, I hope audiences learn something just as I do or, at least, learn to look at India without filters.

Q. Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira directed films up until the age of 105. What keeps you going? I met him in Lisbon when he was still making films at the age of 96. He didn't know any English, I didn't know any Portuguese, but what was important was that he had the energy and excitement of a 25-year-old. It's what I rely on too.

—with Suhani Singh

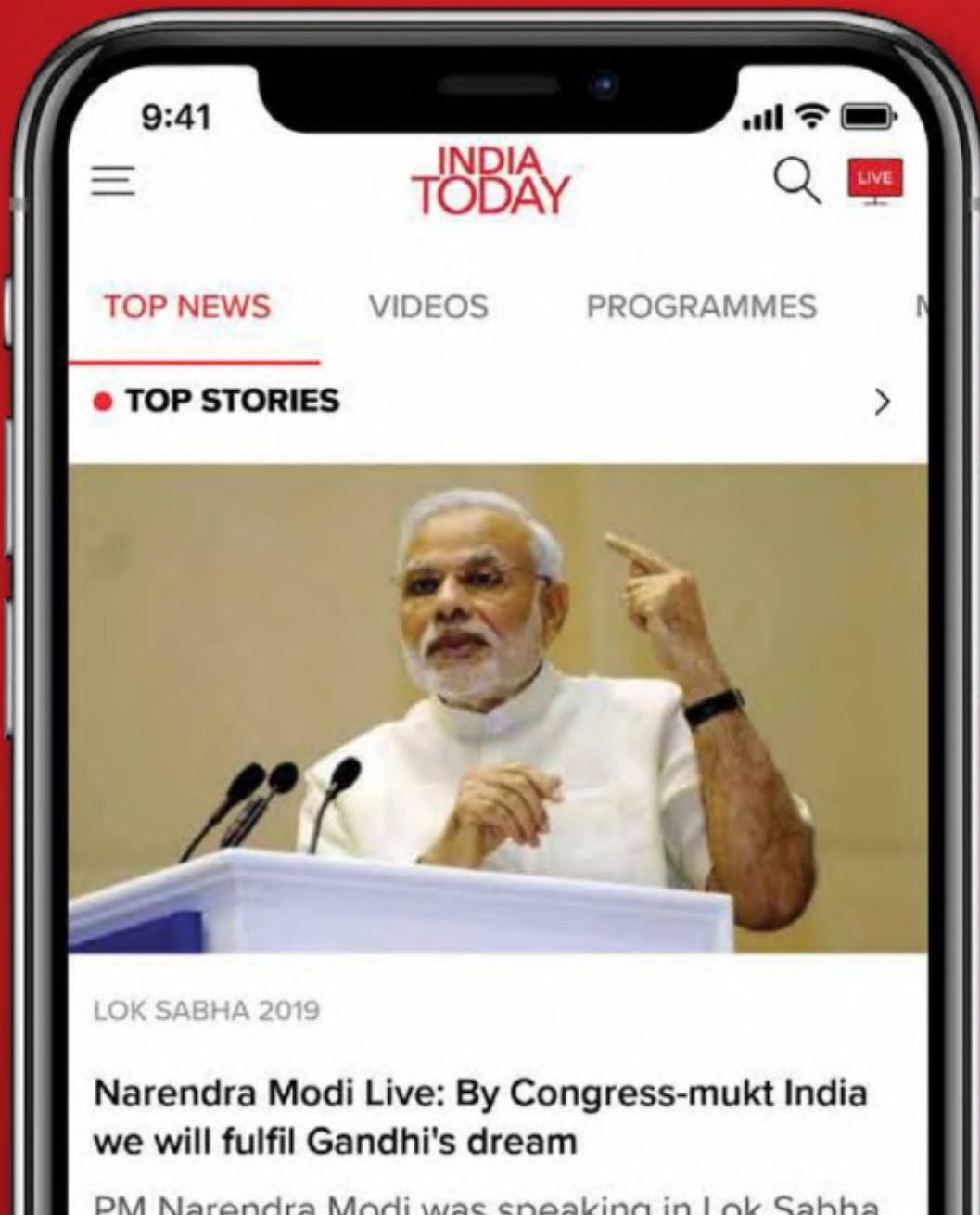


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MARCH 2022

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SPIRITS
HONEY-BASED
FERMENTS
ARE BUZZING

FOOD FADS 2022

Ten top chefs
on the big
trends in Indian
culinary skills



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

MARK TWAIN MAY HAVE DISMISSED THE CAULIFLOWER AS

"nothing but cabbage with a college education," but it looks as if that education may have finally paid off. No fashionable menu these days is without the vegetable, whether roasted, fried or blackened. It could be eaten with rice, steak, deep-fried in a delicate batter and turned into tempura, or roasted whole to unseat chicken or even lamb. 'Flower power' has even wowed 'the Gram' — British chef, restaurateur, and food writer Yotam Assaf Ottolenghi's video clip recipe of a cauliflower salad hit 2.8 million views last month.

Culinary fads or ingredient trends may appear more impulsive on social media, but it's definitely food for thought, as newly ascendant vegetables or traditional grains such as millets claw their way into fine dining menus in India. For Spice's Food and drink issue, we spoke to 10 of the country's top chefs to decode the direction in which this post-pandemic culinary journey is headed. "With the current buzzword being 'immunity', millets are gaining currency not just for the nutrient punch, but because they are local, use minimal water to grow and can be delightfully incorporated in a risotto, pancake, or even in the traditional mutton dish, haleem," says Manisha Bhasin, Corporate Chef, ITC hotels.

With health and sustainability as twin cheerleaders of the culinary squad, the Indian dining out culture is now witnessing a phenomenon called "Reducetarianism" or "Flexitarianism", where meat-eaters are reducing their consumption of animal meats. As a result, even those who do not categorically identify as vegetarian are exploring alternative proteins such as tempeh, plant-based and cultured meats. Traditional wisdom around food practices applied to the modern context is taking ownership of the plate as the pandemic has helped people to appreciate their culinary lineage with the country's finest restaurants featuring micro-regional cuisines, using new world techniques in their menus.

Almost on cue, honey-based ferments producing 4-16 per cent abv (Alcohol by Volume) and flirting with varied tones of sweetness and fizziness are buzzing. Unlike beers, wines, and spirits, meads are gluten free, and low on calories too. But there are no limitations of style, sweetness, and ingredients, minus water and honey of course. There's cultural nostalgia at work: Flavours such as Bhoot Jholokia chillies from the northeast, coffee and jasmine from the south; mangoes and pineapples and Kokum, that staple of every Konkani house. Even rose petals, jamun, orange, and cocoa have been introduced to the spectrum.

Despite the playfulness and versatility of these newcomers the popularity of traditional spirits such as whisky remains unchallenged. Whisky Clubs flourished even during the pandemic and have extended their reach well beyond the traditional 'old boy' constituency. The Mumbai-based Dram Club draws a significant membership from towns such as Barcilly, Vijaywada and Raipur, and nearly 40 per cent of its active members are women.

If the lure of whisky is provenance, the Churchills, Sir Winston's trademark Romeo y Julieta cigar and its shorter cousins — Wide, Short and the Petit — also cash in on the cachet of their namesake's reputation. Churchill is reputed to have smoked around 150,000 of the eponymous cigars in his life — he started early, at about 21.

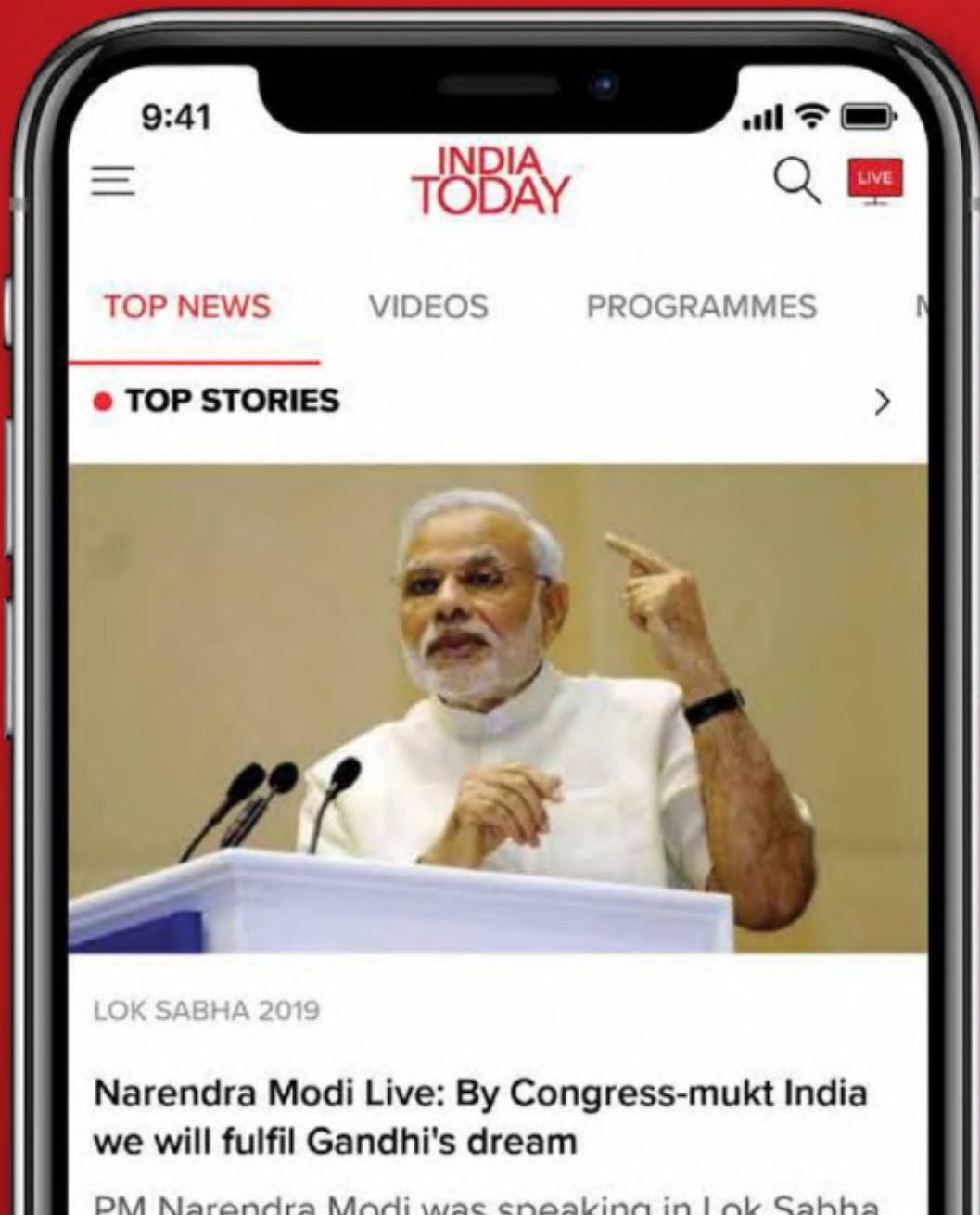
If you prefer another kind of smoke, you can always char the tar with the all-new Audi Q7. What's striking is the way Audi balances a luxury saloon with a 4x4 without breaking a sweat. Given the onset of the unrelenting Indian summer, heading for the hills in this fine machine may be the best idea.

(Aroon Purie)

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CHEFSPEAK

**FOODS, FADS, TRENDS AND INGREDIENTS
DOTTING THE POST-COVID CULINARY
LANDSCAPE OF INDIA**

Cover image BANDEEP SINGH; Food INDIAN ACCENT;
Chef MANISH MEHROTRA; Location INDIAN ACCENT, THE LODHI, NEW DELHI



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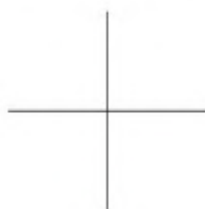
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LASTLOOK

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HOTSHEET

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

THE FEMININE DIVINE

Jewellery underwrites the business of passion almost as spontaneously as food overwhelms the soul. More so when the piece of jewellery deep dives into the aesthetics of feminine energy. Zoya's new collection of contemporary jewellery, Aeterna, draws inspiration from ancient symbols of sacred geometry. The visual narrative of this stunning collection marries a feminine palette in amethyst, pink sapphire, morganites and rose gold with a powerful abstract design to offer jewellery that is both lively and stylish. Designed for versatility, the pieces seamlessly transition from day to dusk. The collection also comes with two new patented stone cuts to deliver 40 pieces that are as modern as they are timeless. The design inspirations for the pieces come from Flower of Life pattern; platonic solids shaped as pyramids, cubes, octahedrons, dodecahedrons, and icosahedrons are thoughtfully integrated in the design as an ode to the elemental feminine energy that lies at the source of creation. They take on subtle detailing within the stone settings, structure of bangles, lattices and metalwork. Read elegant toggle necklaces, lariats, stackable rings that feature complex detailing and intelligent construction. Now that complements the complexity of a woman.

—By Chumki Bharadwaj



FETISH

Shifting Sands of Time

Time and tide wait for none. Neither does technology, apparently. In the hallowed world of haute horology, even the most acclaimed watches evolve to respond to changing demand, styles and technology. In the case of a beauty such as Panerai's Luminor Marina Quaranta, it reshapes the Luminor Marina Collection without tampering with the features that identify the classic Luminor Marina. This includes a cushion-shaped case with a brushed finish, solid lugs and polished bezel. This latest evolution represents a transformation that will definitely raise the brag swag for brand devotees. The 40mm execution of the Luminor Marina Quaranta revives a case size that had been a part of the model's history, embellished with novel functions that increase its versatility. As a result, it will substitute 42mm references,

becoming the smallest Luminor Marina in production. This timepiece achieves a fine balance between an elegant presence and a casual, urbane attitude. The watch is available with a stainless-steel case and three different dial executions possessing strong aesthetic identities.

Each watch is accompanied by an alligator leather strap and a calf leather strap chosen to coordinate with their dial: a matte white dial with straps in black alligator and deep brown calf, a matte black dial paired with black alligator and black calf straps and a sun-brushed blue dial with a navy-blue alligator strap and second in tobacco calf. This is the accessory to complement any setting, occasion or impulse.

Price on request;

Availability Brand Stores





Ammachi Special
Non-vegetarian set menu



Indian Accent Kulfis

Foodscape of the Future



Innergise Rendezvous at
Taj Mahal, New Delhi

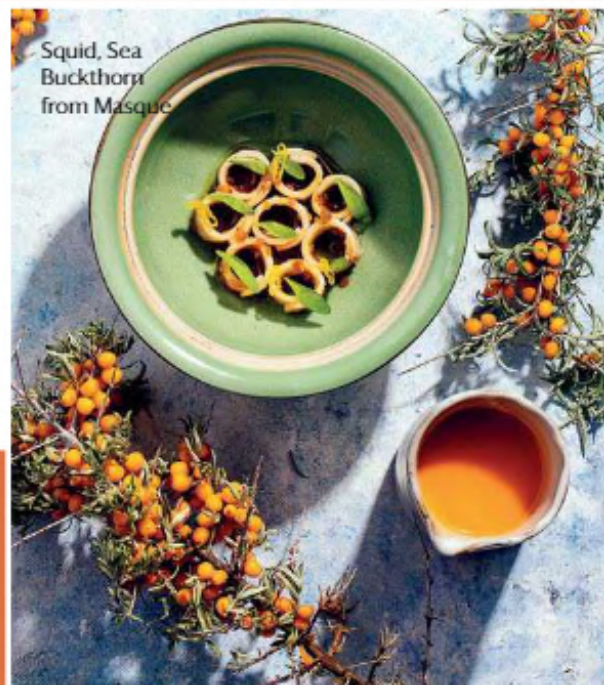
Anar Ki Shikanjee
from ITC Hotels



What India's
post-Covid culinary
moment means for
food, fads, choices,
customer preferences
and trends.

By CHUMKI BHARADWAJ
AND ADITI PAI

Squid, Sea
Buckthorn
from Masque



COVER STORY

FOOD & DRINK | TREND

"One of the very nicest things about life is the way we must regularly stop whatever it is we are doing and devote our attention to eating."

— Luciano Pavarotti

Unfortunately, the operatic tenor did not live to see how prophetic his innocuous comments would become in a post-pandemic world, where food has become not just a connoisseur's quirk or an invocation for the health-obsessed but a rallying cry for normalcy. For the past two years, the better part of which has been spent rattling around the house, food has assumed a divine assignment both in its omnipotence and omnipresence. "Food became a major source of comfort, creativity and release for people around the world during the global standstill wrought by the pandemic in 2020," says Manisha Bhasin, Corporate Chef, ITC hotels.



Charm of Chaat

Light and bright, full of discovery, and quirky in how it packs all the flavours one needs for full and comforting satiety, chaat (Left); is not just a bite of food, it's a way of life, and serving it mindfully and with pizzazz, makes for culinary alchemy and gustatory discovery.

Suvir Saran



Pulled Kathal Phulka Taco
from Manish Mehrotra

Order of the day

Covid 19 has proved to be one of the biggest game changers, especially for the Indian food industry that has gone through some of the most unexpected changes over the last two years of the crisis. With a halting return to routine, the food industry has had to consider new sources of revenue generation, while the restrictions on global imports led to an industry-wide introspection of what could be sustainably sourced from within the borders. Micro-regional cuisines, hyper local ingredients and traditional zero-waste cooking methods have made a comeback. At the same time, diners demanded extravagance, adventure, experimentation and indulgence as they stepped out of their homes and into restaurants.

If vegetarianism, veganism and plant-forward foods are occupying more space on restaurant menus, 'Reductarianism' or 'Flexitarianism' is a phenomenon that's being seen more widely where meat-eaters are reducing their consumption of animal meats and opting for alternative proteins such as tempeh, plant-based and cultured meats. Diners are also fo-



COMFORT FOOD

Biryani and pulao from ITC Hotels (Above); Manisha Bhasin's Katsu Ramen with vegan chicken (Left)

cussing on the source and traceability of their food. "The pandemic has made us take note of what we eat a little more than we did before. Factors such as the credibility of the producer, the source, the impact it has on climate change and how it affects our body will all become more pertinent than it has been over the past few decades," says Thomas Zacharias.

With health as a literal war cry, immunity-boosting foods, fermented drinks such as kanji, kombucha and kefir, and wholesome meals have become the order of the day. Following closely on the checklist is safety, with protocols that call for minimum service at tables, menus scanned through QR codes and bills settled through no-contact means, have all transformed hospitality offerings.

With time to research, reassess and reconfigure choices and offerings, chefs have re-dis-

covered ingredients and turned forgotten household staples into glamorous heroes of the kitchen. Shakkarkand and mishrikand, that were used in homes but never found their way to restaurant menus, until now, got the global touch of world cuisine. "These local vegetables and roots are used not just in Indian cooking but also a variety of international cuisines. Chefs are becoming more and more innovative and coming up with ways to give these ingredients a modern avatar. That's good for our farmers," explains Manish Mehrotra, Chef and Founder, Indian Accent. So yams are used in pasta or fries, sweet potatoes, turnips, kohlrabi and lotus roots are being increasingly used in restaurant kitchens.

TRENDS 2022

Health and comfort take equal ownership of the plate as ingredients such as moringa, turmeric, millets, plant-based and fermented foods as well as low



COVER STORY

FOOD & DRINK | TREND



GREEN GOURMET

Mushrooms on the forest floor from Machan (Right); Arun Sundararaj's recipe for Vegan blueberry pancake (Below)



alcohol beverages catch the attention of the post-pandemic diner. "After a long spell of being at home, when people finally came out to dine, they focussed on eating consciously, wanting freshly-ground masalas and local, fresh ingredients, demanding well-being through food. Millets returned in a big way into our dining experience during the pandemic," explains Regi Mathew, Culinary

Director and Co-Founder of Kappa Chakka Kandhari a restaurant brand that serves traditional Kerala cuisine and has outlets in Chennai and Bengaluru.

The Millets Story

Mathew, who has a collection of 800 traditional recipes scoured from over 265 homes across Kerala, has incorporated millets into his restaurant menus. The simplest reason could be the easy availability, awareness of their nutritional properties and accessible recipes, he explains. Arun Sundararaj, Executive Chef at the Taj Mahal Hotel, New Delhi, who has been curating flavourful dishes from millets agrees. "Everyone wants to be part of the millet culinary story. Millets have always been a great source of health and it is heartening to see this magical grain being rediscovered," he says. While homes have traditionally used them in khichdis and rotis, chefs



Enduring Trend

"There is more transparency, bridging the gap between the back and the front of the house. Guests are more confident of the place and the food being served."

Manish Mehrotra



Currying local flavour

During a recent tour of MP, I saw the locals use bharg leaves in daily cooking because it grows extensively—goes into chutneys and vegetables.

Prateek Sadhu



Seasonal, regional, delicious

Add millets in daily meals since it packs nutrients: Little millet and moong dal khichdi with moringa leaves, a side of ragi pappadam and yogurt cured chillies.

Manisha Bhasin

Chef speak



Spirit of food

"My chicken tikka pie: Topped with mashed potato instead of pastry, with a chicken tikka filling, it's the perfect refined comfort food."

Atul Kochhar



Significant food awakening

A family that eats together, vibes together: a pleasant resurgence of family culture, bonding over meals is a great post-pandemic plus.

Manu Chandra



Preferences

Many guest still prefer to dine at home so the packed food business is here to stay. With Qmin, we were able to identify this customer's need and continue to surprise and delight.

Arun Sundararaj

COVER STORY

FOOD & DRINK | TREND

are using them in international cuisines as well. "Millets can be easily incorporated in our diets as risottos, pancakes, khichdi or even haleem," claims Bhasin of TTC Hotels.

Going the green mile

Veganism, meat-free dishes and plant-forward food products are getting more space on restaurant menus as people return to their favourite fine-dine haunts. Michelin Star Chef, Atul Kochhar, who has recently opened, Sagar Cuisines of India, in Gurgaon, has noticed a bigger focus on meat-free dishes which even "devout meat eaters" enjoy. "Plant-based proteins are constantly becoming more popular, and in turn closer to the meats they're designed to replace, in terms of taste and texture," he says. Mehrotra of Indian Accent, sees a higher consumption of vegetarian dishes with a growing trend of people turning vegetarian by choice and not because of religion alone. This growing vegetarianism, he believes, is a great opportunity for Indian chefs to present and perfect their vegetarian repertoire.

Zero waste and sustainable kitchens

Waste not want not has translated to choices that weigh in on local, seasonal and indigenous ingredients with a low carbon footprint. If local ingredients are being re-imagined into world cuisines such as yam in fries and millets in risottos, it is a lesson well learnt during times when shops were closed and local farmers were the go-to vendors for fresh produce. "The pandemic taught us the importance of food sovereignty and less dependence on imported ingredients. Chefs were forced to work with local ingredients, which has become a trend now. Concepts like local produce, farm to table, seasonal dining, etc. are becoming popular," says Chef Satbir Bakshi, Corporate Chef of The Oberoi Group.

If necessity is the mother of invention, scarcity definitely inspired innovation. Reeling under a restricted supply of ingredients, home and restaurant kitchens went into minimal wastage mode and started finding utility for all parts of a fruit or vegetable, pushing up the sustainability quotient. "From using 'ugly vegetables' to the scraps of fruits and vegetables, it was time to give this concept an interesting twist. And consider-



REGIONAL SURPRISES

Clockwise from top: Rogan josh sausage, katlam aam papad and Carrot Chevar tart from Masque (Above right): Regi Mathew's Kozhi Curry and Nellikai masala (Below)





ing the minimal lifestyle, a lot of people are continuing to choose this practice as a long-standing philosophy for restaurants," says Bhasin. Across the ITC's Pavillion restaurants, they run a 'Root to Shoot' programme that promotes the use of every part of a vegetable. Hussain Shahzad, Executive Chef, Hunger Inc Hospitality, turns kohlrabi leaves into a creamy puree and uses whey to make yakhni for the famous Gucchi and Girda at The Bombay Canteen. Earlier, these went into the bins. "People did not know ways of using things better. The lack of something creates the necessity for something other and that's how cuisines evolve," he concludes.

Joining the Dots

But it's no longer enough to opt for the freshest kale or red snapper, diners are getting into conversations with chefs about the origin and source of the food they are served. "Traceability is another important aspect as people become conscious about where the food is coming from; which farm and the practices they follow. This is a growing trend post covid, says Prateek Sadhu, former Co-Founder of Masque. Kitchens are also using technologies that can improve transparency including radio frequency ID tracking of ingredients throughout the supply chain. Mehrotra welcomes this growing interest to know more about the ingredients on their plate. "This had led to more transparency, bridging the gap between the back and the front of the house. Kitchens are more open, guests are more confident of the place and the food being served to them. This also helps restaurateurs up their game," he adds.

Re-discovering India's culinary heritage

If Mathew makes a delectable marinade for the Nellikai masala fish from sundried gooseberries, inspired by the traditional cuisine of the tribal communities of Agasthyamalai, Shahzad brings hara chana, ponk and the launji of Rajasthan into the winter menu at The Bombay Canteen and O Pedro. "The pandemic allowed people to explore micro cuisines. People are now delving deeper into Indian regional food and it is not just a surface level interpretation of what Indian food can be. There is greater acceptance for regionally diverse food that embraces our heritage," says Shahzad. Kochhar agrees, adding that in fact, "customers are now willing and wanting to taste something potentially unfamiliar from various Indian regions," says Atul Kochhar.

COVER STORY

FOOD & DRINK | TREND



#Homechef trending

Instagram, like other social media platforms, is witness to how the pandemic provoked people to pick up the ladle, spurring not just a recreational buzz but an entire industry of cloud kitchens. "Home cooking and entertaining are two wonderful outcomes of the pandemic. 'Let's make dining at-home more exciting' became not just a trending hashtag but aspirational, making eating-in as sexy, chic, exciting and rich in offerings as going out had been thus far," says Michelin Star Chef Suvir Saran. Manu Chandra claims that the interest in cooking spiked when "banana bread made its way into every home, everyone's Instagram story and more so on TikTok."

Luxury on wheels

There has been a paradigm shift in the post-pandemic Indian dining culture. But it isn't just the rapid proliferation of cloud kitchens, DIY meal kits and take-away menus of restaurants that are testimony to the pandemic-fuelled demand for takeaways and food delivery. "It has popularised and introduced the concept of home dining from five-star hotels, which was previously never seen," says Bakshi of the Oberoi Group. Either way, the pandemic has introduced the need for having diverse options in what we eat at home, and "while restaurant dining will come back





*

SHOCK AND AWE

Egg cloud épinard and edamame from The Oberoi (Above); Bombay Canteen's smoked pumpkin launji (Extreme left); and Military hotel mutton sukka from their winter menu (Below left)

to pre-pandemic levels gradually, this trend of innovative home dining is here to stay," says Bhasin.

Comfort on a platter

As creatures of habit where even our muscles have memories, drawing on comfort food provides not just a reunion with tastes but also a return to ritual at a time when routine was a fargone conclusion. Comfort food, as Sadhu says, means different things to different people but "people want to eat whatever makes them happy." For some, it can be food they grew up eating while for others, it can be food that evokes happy memories and emotions. Realising that childhood favourites can be comforting, chefs are reintroducing traditional comfort foods on their menus, especially chaat.

Chaat for a lot of Indians and chefs is that comfort dish they turn to. When Saran decided to serve chaat on his restaurant menu at New York City's Devi in 2004, he says no other chef had plated it innovatively. He plated the bhelpuri as a pyramid,

served it on a handmade Japanese ceramic plate and garnished it with caviar. Today, Saran has teamed up with artisanal ice cream brand Cold Love to introduce an innovative rendition of Chaat Ice cream he calls Delhi 6, a modern twist on the classic 'Dahi chaat'—a savoury layered delight that combines sweet tamarind chutney sorbet, spicy mint chutney sorbet and tangy raita ice cream with cracking boondi. Mehrotra agrees that chaat is a dish that showcases the real India because it is colourful, unique and celebrated. "It is a perfect dish that is full of flavours—sweet, sour, tangy and salty all at once, it has different textures; it is silken and chewy at the same time. It fulfils cravings and satisfies the soul. In the past two years, everyone has gone through some form of tragedy and if there is one dish that uplifts the mood, it is chaat," he philosophises. After all, what is food if not music for the soul.

"If music be the food of love, play on..." Pavarotti would definitely have concurred!

Chef speak



Revived Classic

The PanchDhan khichda—one pot meal, full of flavour and antioxidants with immunity building properties perfectly integrated with a super presentation.

Satbir Bakshi



Rediscovered ingredient

Gooseberries—sundried with fresh chillies and turmeric make for a great marinade.

Regi Mathew



Deciphering demand

Extravagance, adventure, experimentation and indulgence is what people choose when they step out of their homes and into restaurants.

Hussain Shahzad

(CAULI) FLOWER POWER

No fashionable menu is
without the vegetable
now, whether roasted,
fried or blackened

By GIULIA CROUCH



FOOD & DRINK

TREND | PRODUCT

It can be rice, it can be steak, it can be deep-fried in a delicate batter and turned into tempura, it can be roasted whole and take the place of chicken or lamb, it can be “wings”, “popcorn” and it can even, though I don’t like to believe it, be pizza. Cauliflower is many things; seemingly everything. But there is one thing it is not: going away any time soon.

The humble vegetable, once only good for swamping in cheese or serving as boring crudité, has undergone the most

glamorous of “glow-ups”. I’d be willing to bet a lifetime’s supply of the things that there isn’t a single small-plate restaurant in London that hasn’t featured the currently very cool crucifer on its menu in the past five years.

At first the obsession was the whole roast. It comes out brilliantly burnished (if not a little brain-like) and can be pepped up beforehand with a dry rub and afterwards with a cool yoghurt dip or spicy sauce. Stick a knife in it, sprinkle a little coriander and maybe a few pomegran-



ate seeds and you have yourself an undeniably impressive centrepiece. Now chefs have moved beyond the roast.

The newly opened Aubrey, a Japanese izakaya in Knightsbridge, is serving “charcoal cauliflower karaage”, a veggie take on the Japanese fried-chicken dish whereby cooked cauliflower is covered in a black charcoal coating and served with a fresh, zingy yuzu mayo. At Ham Yard, a swish hotel in Soho, customers are said to be going in just to order KFC (that is, Korean fried cauliflower) the recipe for which normally involves frying battered cauliflower then immersing it in a wickedly delicious sauce of garlic, sugar, mirin, soy sauce and gochujang, a popular Korean chilli paste.



VEGGING OUT

Roasted Cauliflower CAL-DEEN from O Pedro, with fresh turmeric and coconut milk curry with roasted cauliflower and crispy okra (Left)

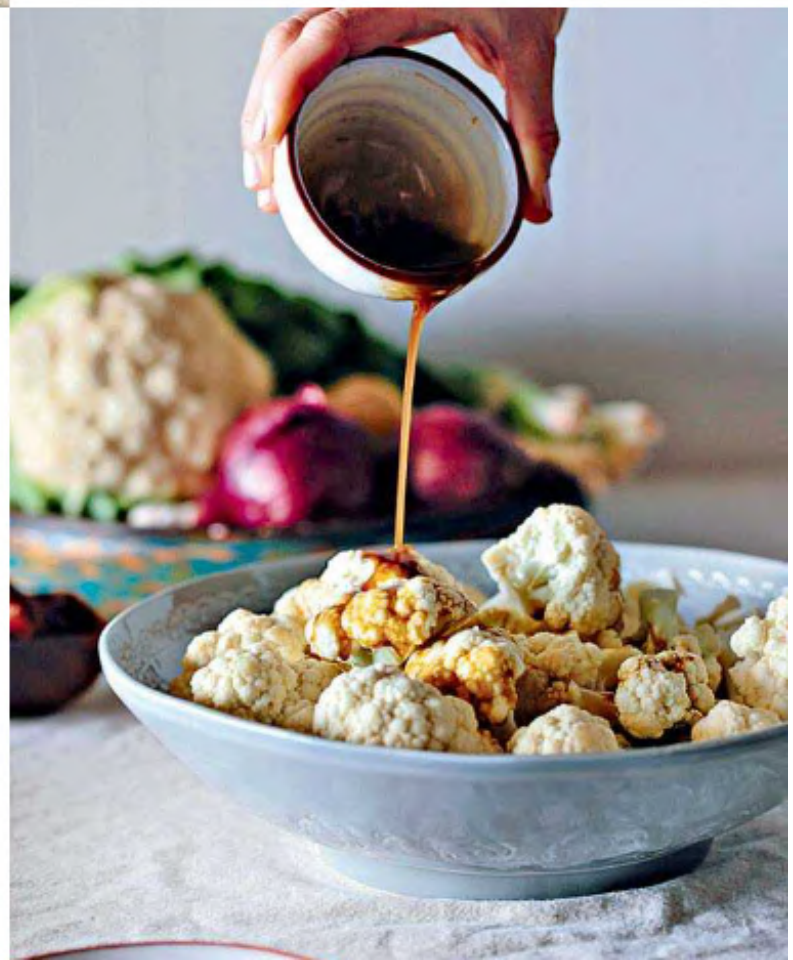


lemons, but at home she likes to keep things simple. "I really like to taste the cauliflower, so often I steam it and add salt, pepper and olive oil. It's delicious. Or I like to slice it very thinly using a mandolin and eat it as a salad with a dressing. I love it pickled, I love to chuck it in mac and cheese, I love it raw; I just love it." The recipe that's most popular in her house, she says, is cauliflower soup. "Onions, salt, pepper, garlic, cream, lots of cauliflower, including the leaves, blitz it; it's heaven."

We've hit peak cauliflower

It's not just in restaurants that cauliflower is taking centre plate. At Waitrose sales are up 10 per cent on last year. And, over on Instagram, Yotam Ottolenghi's second-highest viewed recipe video clip, with 2.8 million views, is a cauliflower salad. So when did cauliflower's ascent to king of the veg begin? Back in 2013 New York Magazine decided it was the "Vegetable Most Likely to Be Mistaken for a Piece of Meat" and since then the trend for slicing it thickly and griddling it like a steak or turning it into "wings" has truly taken off. Now it's everywhere and cooked in a variety of ways—fried, roasted, steamed, in salads.

Sabrina Ghayour, a lifelong cauli fan and cookbook author, says the secret to its wild success is its texture. "I'm a meat eater, so I'm not trying to create substitutes, but if your cauliflower is perfect. It holds its shape and offers texture and volume. You can serve it as a main dish, whereas you couldn't with, say, a cabbage." One of Sabrina's recipes instructs readers to char slices of cauliflower and serve with tahini, harissa honey sauce and preserved



FOOD & DRINK

TREND | PRODUCE



VERSATILE GLORY

Cauliflower can be made into rice (Extreme left), steak, deep-fried in a delicate batter, roasted whole or pepped up beforehand with a dry rub and afterwards with a cool yoghurt dip (Below) or spicy sauce (Below left) and even as a delectable fresh salad tossed with other greens (Left)



PHOTOGRAPHS BY: ALAMY



No late bloomer

Cauliflower as a centrepiece is nothing new for some cuisines. The restaurant owner Imad Alarnab, of Imad's Syrian Kitchen in Soho, says that in Damascus lots of traditional recipes are based around it. One of his favourites involves frying chunks and then baking them in the oven covered in a rich sauce made of tomato paste, black pepper, salt, cumin, coriander and garlic. One of the most popular dishes in his restaurant is zahraa harra (literally "hot cauliflower"); a dish of baked cauliflower, roasted red onions and red peppers, crispy garlic, coriander, olive oil and tahini sauce. "I honestly love everything about cauliflowers, but they've been loved in Syria for ever," Alarnab says. There it's served as a street food, fried and put in a wrap with green salad, lemon, garlic sauce and chilli flakes. "You can either have [the wrap] with potatoes, baby aubergine or cauliflower, and cauliflower is always the most expensive one because it's everyone's favourite."

So is it time to ask if we've reached peak cauliflower?

Maybe, says Sabrina. "We're a fickle mass of human beings, unfortunately. Maybe something else will take off, but as far as I'm concerned cauliflower will always be one of the kings of my kitchen. And I will spend the rest of my life devoted to making my husband, whose idea of veg is potatoes, love it."

Long may its reign continue!

Courtesy The Sunday times (UK)



To Bee or Not to Bee

Mead is reclaiming its hallowed roots, promising not just a flavourful, spirited alternative, but it weighs in on the sustainability narrative too.

By **GAGAN SHARMA**
Sommelier

If Adam and Eve were to put down the apple and pick up a drink instead, it could only be mead. The teetotaler Einstein once prophesied that the day bees die, humans will have only four years to live. Then, could he have possibly been drinking something else? And it was only mead that ensured that Pandavas survived their exile in the pitiless rugged wilderness. The oldest beverage known to mankind is now making waves in India too; its birthplace, where it all began. Yet, it's still under covers, waiting to be unveiled and deciphered.

Mead is nature taking the bees' work and turning it into another discerning gem. Honey is fermented producing 4-16 per cent abv with varied sweetness and fizziness, to which further flavours can be added. Traditionally, these were either fruits or spices, adding to the medicinal, antibacterial, antioxidant values of alcohol in the first place, hence the expression 'davaa daaru'. Honey in itself is a soother and the loosely grouped term 'madhu' has represented alcoholic beverages in India since the Vedas, thus bars were christened 'madhushala', inspiring poets like Ghalib and Harivansh Rai Bacchan. Our alco-bevs have revolved around honey, so has our civilisation, toting alcohol as the only antidote to all deadly pan-



demics, apparently. And as with all things old; traditions revisit as a second coming. So also with meads which is being resurrected with glory and passion.

Old Wine in a new Bottle?

Moonshine Meadery's recent quirky stint at Shark Tank India kindled countless conversations. The Indian gin craze and meads approximately began at the same time, circa early 2018. While gins have created a revolution, half a decade on meads are yet to be completely decoded. Something as rudimentary as setting it as a category in itself has been a task. Though it comes in a pint bottle and our excise lists it as wine, you'll see #MeadIsNotBeer trending on Instagram, which, let's agree, is the ultimate socially-befitting court of decision!

Mead to Order

Many urban warriors are reviving the art of beekeeping now. Rohan Rehani, Moonshine Meadery's co-founder, quit engineering, and mastered the art through a professional quantification. And in the hunt for the most sustainable, purest, and varietal honeys they've setup their own namesake honey brand. Is it really the purest though? Well, here's a



TASTE OF GOODNESS
Arka defines the sweet end of the spectrum



true story. I was born allergic to honey, a reaction so strong that a teaspoon would land me in an ICU. Until I visited Moonshine and dared tasting their varietal honeys, and buying 8 kg over the following weeks. Turns out, I was allergic to fake honey (or foney as we call it now), and had never experienced the real stuff!

Why the move to meads?

Unlike beers, wines, and spirits, meads are gluten free, and low on calories too, taking away the guilt of nursing a beer-belly or chubby cheeks. Unlike the stubbornness of the universally written rules around Witbiers, Hefeweizens and wines, meads have no limitations of style, sweetness, and what goes in it, minus water and honey of course. "There's a dearth of flavourful beverages in the country. We bring in a cultural nostalgia too working with flavours like Bhoot Jholakia chillies, coffee and jasmine that's very southern, mangoes and pineapples that we've grown-up with, Kokum that every Maharashtrian-Goan house has, etc", says Nitin Vishwas, Moonshine's co-founder. Priyanka Save, co-founder of Arka Honey Dessert too has brought rose petals, jamun, orange, and cocoa to the spectrum.

What sets mead apart

Apart from the playfulness, no-expiry tag, and versatility, it's their ability to make Earth a better

place. Bees add immense value to the environment, making it more sustainable, productive, and supportive. Dr. Yoginee Budhkar of Cerana Meads shares "if it wasn't for bees, humans can't use pollen anyway. Bees do the work for us. Not just segregating wet and dry garbage, and avoiding plastic straws, drinking mead is a delicious way of supporting the environment and making better choices."

As I write this just after Women's Day, Save makes a powerful statement with "the queen bee is rising". The recent release of Jack Daniels Honey and Patron's Honey Tequila is a global statement that it most definitely is. "Meads and honey-accented drinks are a cool bridge between the childhood favourite cola and sherbet and the bitter-toned wines and beers. And in the Indian weather, a light, flavoursome, guilt-free drink makes the perfect fit", adds Vishwas. Options vary from the dry and fruity meads from Moonshine to the Spiced Yule from Cerana and the 'pressed and blessed' dessert nectars from Arka. We hear more are on their way.

What'll make 2022 the golden year for meads?

Unlike grains for beers, honey is in limited supply and can't be over produced. In the last decade and a half, producers have refined their offerings from their liquids, to labels, storytelling, and styles, gath-



ALCO-BEV

TREND | MEAD



GRAPEVINE BUZZ

Moonshine Meadery makes meads fun, with a plethora of flavours to try (Above left); Pymments are meads with grapes, putting two best things from Nashik together (Left)

ering evidence from market demand and aspirations. Finally, they seem to have garnered enough confidence to toy and flirt with hues and flavor profiles with unabashed gallantry and flair. What Bira did for beers in India—providing an alternative to mass-produced chemical-induced lagers—meads will do for a bigger spectrum of the menu. And let's be honest, we've also been spoilt for choice; it's rare to go to the liquor store and return without picking a few new labels. FOMO is for real.

No matter what your motivation or inspiration that drives you to mead—a new drink, flavourful offering, sustainability, environmentalism, or guilt-free drinking—it's here to stay. And as Einstein urged: Keep the bees alive if you want to indulge in good choices. Translation? Drink meads and make the earth great again.



HAPPY HOURS

The whisky dinner with Dram and Supper Club, Kolkata (Above and Top right); The Glenlivet distillery (right) Swati Sharma of the Dram Club, Mumbai (Left)





SPIRITS

WHISKY | TREND

Join the CLUB

The appreciation of whisky from a solitary pursuit to a shared passion among a community of connoisseurs is evolving to the benefit of both content and consumer.

By **VIKRAM ACHANTA**
Co-Founder 30 Best Bars India

It takes a village, well not quite a village, but just a small crew of people who are driven by a singular beat, and with the knowledge that their craft is bringing joy to millions around the world. Most of them, working in distilleries like Aberlour or the Glenlivet in Scotland's Speyside region, pass on their craft to their next generation, keeping the craft within the family. Their knowledge is so deeply ingrained that it requires a special breed of connoisseurs around the world, who can help carry this appreciation forward.

On a balmy October evening at a luxury hotel in Kolkata in 2021, a group of 30-odd women and men sat down to a sumptuous four-course dinner starting with soft shell crab, moving on to red curry bisque, scallops and then a seafood and Thai chili sausage, followed by Lamb chops with the final flourish of Adzuki bean and chocolate decadent for dessert. The only difference between this and other dinners: This one had been carefully paired with a range of fine single malt whiskies starting with the Scapa Glansa, going on to a Glenlivet 12, then the Aberlour 12, and

finally with dessert, the Aberlour 18, which is dessert in itself, pairing brilliantly with the Chocolate decadent.

Spirited Evenings

While brands like Scapa and The Aberlour are not the most common when one thinks of single malts in India, but palates and consumers of luxury whiskies and spirits are evolving, with a greater appreciation for the finer nuances of the liquid, skills, craftsmanship and even the brand values.

The group gathered that evening were members of the Dram and Supper Club, set up in 2018, with about 25-30 couples as members. What sets them apart is best explained by Anand Chintamani, one of India's leading single malt raconteurs who anchored the evening: "a subtle league of friends who gather often to partake in a common pleasure in a city that knows how to celebrate—not just party." And maintaining that league of friends is what their prime focus has been rather than scaling up membership despite frequent requests. Some finely curated experiences are more amenable to smaller groups.

SPIRITS

WHISKY | TREND



The future is hybrid

Whisky Clubs in other parts of India, including the Mumbai-based Dram Club, founded by Swati Sharma and Vinayak Singh, have stayed active through the pandemic. Virtual tastings have been a feature of this time, with the liquid delivered in advance to your doorstep, with the screen and your audio link with the host as he takes you through the tasting. Such hybrid tastings along with providing a welcome diversion have also helped in scaling up these events, taking them outside the big-city constituency. A notable part of their 4,200 member base comes from towns such as Bareilly, Vijaywada and Raipur. What is even more heartening considering this year's theme of International Woman's Day is #breakthebias, is that the Dram Club counts about 35-40 per cent of women as members.

What started out as an ode to their shared passion of whiskies with friends and families, The Dram Club now come full circle with a formalised structure, which helps spread the word (and the whisky!) far and wide. Their efforts have certainly born fruit. At a recent blind tasting of three sherry casked whiskies, the Aberlour, the Glenfarclas 105 and Kavalan, a majority of the members were successfully able to match the whisky they were tasting to the brands.

M-Apping tastes

They've also launched an App, helping members solve the perplexing problem of which whisky to buy, by matching their flavour preferences to an appropriate dram. The Dram Club Reserve, a premier membership model, enables preferential access to in-person tastings, among many other benefits.





RAISING THE BAR

Anand Chintamani, leading a whisky dinner for Dram and Supper Club, Kolkata paired with Aberlour, Scapa and The Glenlivet) (Extreme left); Tasting event organised by SMAC (Left)



A Leap of Faith

Hemanth Rao, founder of SMAC (Single Malt Amateur Club), based out of Bangalore, has more than 4,000 members scattered across the globe. But of course he had the advantage of starting out as early as 2011. Born out of the desire to create an Indian idiom for appreciating whisky, "purely out of love for the spirit and its history" the club primarily offers a platform for amateurs, professionals, and connoisseurs to share experiences and information on single malt whisky. One such memorable experience was a trip to the Paul John distillery in Goa, where 50 of their members were present for the leap day of 2020. The occasion: The release of the first single cask whisky in India by Paul John exclusively for the members of SMAC.

D2C

As more and more Indian single malt

brands continue to be released, including higher end variants of marquee brands like The Glenlivet and Aberlour, brands are realising the importance in developing a direct interface with consumers. "SMAC, Bangalore was the first whisky club we engaged with in India. They spread the gospel of the brand as well as the category and I certainly think they are the icing on the cake," says Ashok Chokalingam of Amrut. A loyal band of fans certainly helps the Direct to Consumer connect, bypassing traditional means of brand building. Whisky clubs such as these perform a crucial role in the continuing evolution and strengthening of this category in India.

Remember, passion is the fount, so if you're inspired to start something similar in your city or town, it doesn't take much more than a robust whisky collection and a generous heart. May a thousand whisky clubs bloom!





Churchill's Guilty Pleasures

**The long and short of
romancing the Romeo y Julieta**

By SHANKER GANGADHAR

There is Churchill and there are the Churchills. Sir Winston's trademark Romeo y Julieta cigar and its shorter cousins—Wide, Short and the Petit—top the list. Churchill is reputed to have smoked around 150,000 of the namesake cigars since he was 21 years old; a passion he discovered in Havana during a Spanish bombardment of the city. It was named after him during a visit to the Romeo Y Julieta factory in 1946. The Churchillian cachet sparked the cigar's immense popularity and the company subsequently launched two Robustos (55 x 5.1 inches) namely Short Churchill in 2006 and the Wide Churchill in 2009.

Knocking on Heaven's Door

If Oscar Wilde's cigarette is the perfect pleasure, a well-constructed classic cigar like the Churchill is the philosopher's perfect companion, the connoisseur's redemption and, never mind, the parvenu's fashion accessory. A good cigar must look good, both unlit and lit—all the Romeo y Julieta Churchills burn evenly with clean, thick white smoke and thick grey ash that holds well. Rookie smokers may find it too strong and spicy. Begin with a cold draw—puff the unlit cigar to get its characteristically woody aroma though the draw is a tad bitter at start.

The three distinct stages of smoking a cigar are 'the rule

INDULGENCE

CIGAR | BRAND



DOES SIZE MATTER?

Sir Winston's trademark Romeo y Julieta cigar and its shorter cousins—Wide, (left) and the Short (Below left)



coaxed out by the warmth spreads on the lips, a patina of Latin indulgence.

The Best Finish Last

The Churchills are a legerdmain of scented tricks that would have pleased the imperial warden of Britain's wartime years immensely. The veins, if at all visible, are discreet and well bred. Both the Short and Wide Churchill have a chocolaty flavour, with strong notes of hay, mild coffee and burnt caramel. In spite of the Short Churchill short length, smoked properly it should last for nearly an hour to a half hour—the same as the 5 inches long Wide Churchill. Though the latter's burn could be more steady. The Petite Churchill is shorter and less wide at 4 inches length and a ring gauge of 50. The wide Churchill is a formidable cigar with a 55 ring gauge. In its final third draw, you get a spicy bouquet of black pepper and coffee versions of cocoa, espresso and chicory.

Because it takes time for the smoke to travel the Churchill's seven inches, imparting

of thirds'—stage one "The Hay," the second is the sweet spot named 'Heaven' and the last, is 'Dirt' or 'Hell.' It is recommended to toast Churchill's foot (end of the lit cigar) first. By the start of Heaven, the Cuban angels fill your mouth with exotic flavours, a melange of spices like nutmeg, citrus, caramel, cedar and earth laden with cedar. In the Churchill's hand rolled caramel coloured wrapper, the cigar is both soft and firm in your fingers like a fond friend's welcome. Let the mildly salty smoke, thick, velvety and smooth roll on the tongue; smoking a cigar is a contemplative exercise. By now, the oil, slowly

INDULGENCE

CIGAR | BRAND



FIRE BRAND

The Petite Churchill (Left) is shorter and less wide at 4 inches length and a ring gauge of 50



richness and complexity as it passes through the flavourful Cuban leaves, the aroma is light, fresh and mild. Enjoy it slowly and the cigar should last about two hours or more—or else you will get some harsh notes you could regret. The difference between the Romeo y Julieta Churchill and its dense nicotine-loaded versions is the former's smooth flavour and tight feel. In spite of their distinctive flavours, all four Churchills have common traits such as primary cedar notes, firm and smooth construction, steady burn, oily and un-veined wrappers, and woody flavours with peppery variations. Smoking a Churchill is possibly the best way to go up in smoke.

Available at cingari.in

LIMITED EDITION

WATCH | BRAND

Game On

Longines, the official partner and timekeeper of the 2022 Commonwealth Games, presents the HydroConquest XXII Commonwealth Games.

By **CHUMKI BHARADWAJ**

Longines' collaboration with sporting events is as legendary as the brand itself. So the HydroConquest XXII Commonwealth Games is as exclusive as it gets, limited to 2,022 pieces only. It celebrates one of the world's greatest sporting events that hosts athletes from over 70 Commonwealth nations and territories. With centuries of watchmaking expertise under its belt, the brand has played a pivotal role in a number of technological advances and continues to support constant innovation. No wonder then that the watches from the HydroConquest collection are distinguished by their daring design, taking up the codes of diving and aimed at demanding athletes. Water-resistance up to 300 metres, a unidirectional rotating bezel, a screw down crown and case back, and a double secu-

rity folding clasp with an integrated diving extension-piece are features that embody the seamless style of these timepieces. The watch proudly displays the vivid colours of the event logo on its black ceramic bezel, as well as on the minute-track of its black sunray dial. Its 41 mm steel case contains an exclusive self-winding movement with a silicon balance-spring to ensure precision and longevity. These qualities further enhance the performance quotient, allowing Longines to offer a 5-year warranty with this watch. Further, the case back is engraved with the Birmingham 2022 logo and "Limited Edition - 1 out of 2022". The watch's sporty and modern lines is further complemented by a stainless steel bracelet. Sporting glory indeed.



Old is Gold

Converting old jewellery locked up in bank vaults into wearable pieces of art without damning guilt or damaging the original piece is the perfect way to preserve the past as a present to yourself.

By POONAM SONI

As with all extreme challenges, the pandemic has forced us to evolve. Apart from discovering new bends on familiar roads, it has also opened up new paths and unique career opportunities, provoking the emergence of a new demographic. This new class of affluence is exploring luxury and the art of good living in a society where exposure is still limited and travel restricted. Their choices are different and unexplored. But with demand comes supply and as new tastes emerge, new trends apply.

With limited travel and access to luxury goods, the jewellery industry experienced a surge but the trends underwent a dramatic makeover. Our Poönam Soni brand had originally earned its expertise in experimental luxury jewellery, using unique fusion techniques marrying art with coloured stones, enamels and textures. However, the orders during the Covid period focussed more on wedding jewellery in a heavier format but with familiar designs. Tastes





MAKEOVER MAGIC

Designer Poonam Soni (Above); A remodelled necklace from old jewellery with emeralds and villandi diamonds (Extreme left); Redesigned coin set with rubies, emerald and villandi diamonds (Left)

JEWELLERY

DESIGN | INVESTMENT



TAPPING THE SOURCE

The original locker jewels before the makeover

during these testing times tilted towards classics with trend-agnostic designs that could be passed down as heirlooms. Whimsical shopping appeared to be the glory of a lost era.

Locker room jewels to Noteworthy accessory

But in 2021, we launched a new concept 'Metamorphosis', which revamped and restructured old locker jewels. The concept of melting old gold to make new pieces has always existed, but it was primarily pushed by need. This was different. Metamorphosis promised women who had unused jewellery locked up that was practically unwearable. Most of this kind of jewellery is inherited so it weighs heavy in sentimental terms. Allowing women to update it absolves them of the guilt of 'hoarding' it.

Metamorphosis accorded the owners the option to revive and restructure the old pieces without breaking or melting the piece, balancing its monetary and emotional value with a completely

new makeover. The idea: To build over the existing piece with new motifs, coloured stones, rose cut diamonds and adding various textures. The design element was classic, timeless with a vintage feel using old cut diamonds, pale emeralds oxidised gold and natural pearls. The base gold of the customer gave an advantage by giving the old jewellery the patina of a 'heritage' look.

When investment becomes aspirational

Most customers had no design connect with the old pieces and would naturally be skeptical as to whether they could actually be turned around. Many of them would be unable to recognise their own pieces after I finished designing. This encouraged them to return with other pieces from their lockers.

The idea of converting an investment piece into an aspirational one is an exciting prospect for it's an all-round win-win for everyone. The customers do not need to compromise on

the monetary value of old gold, or the emotional guilt of melting down an heirloom. Instead, what came out of this 'Metamorphosis' is a brand-new custom designed piece at half the cost. It's especially popular with wedding clients who could now get more pieces within the price budget by using up their hitherto unused old locker jewellery.

Upcycling valuable old pieces into wearable, bespoke jewellery also sates the sustainability goal, which has now gathered momentum as a global movement to save the environment. Waste not, want not, as they say. Apart from customers, this also creates jobs for skilled craftsmen, since making these specialised handmade pieces required careful handling so as not to damage the original jewellery. Among many lessons, the one global message that the pandemic has successfully conveyed is that in order to stay relevant, you have to evolve and stay ahead of the curve. And the old must make way for the new.

A Tech-tonic Shift

The Audi Q7 facelift is a modest luxury saloon that wouldn't break a sweat in the outdoors



By **DHIRAM SHAH**

The 2020 Audi Q7 has been waiting in the wings for a long time to come to India, despite its popularity and widely-embraced qualities. But it is finally here in a petrol-only avatar and a dash of subtle facelifts. What's striking is the way Audi balances a luxury saloon that does 4x4 things sufficiently well. You will just as likely find a luxury family car that can carry a fair amount of inter-state cargo and offer a sensorial treat with the expensive technology at the

same time. Nuts and bolts: It can get you out of a tricky off-road situation without breaking into a sweat. Yet, the Audi Q7 hasn't been peddled as an off-roader.

Judge it by the cover

It exudes comfort and style through and through. The exteriors are mildly bolder than previous versions, with a brand-new octagonal grille that is large and elegant. On either side of it are matrix LED headlamps that put on a little light show each time the car is locked or unlocked—as do the tail lamps. Other highlights on the body include vertical slats,



HELLO GOOD LOOKING

Exuding style and comfort, the exteriors are mildly bolder than previous versions with a brand-new octagonal grille



ENGINE 2995 cc, V6 turbocharged petrol
TRANSMISSION 8 speed automatic AWD
POWER 335.25bhp@5200-6400rpm /
 500Nm@1370-4500rpm
TOP SPEED 250 kmph
 0 to 100 km/hr 5.9 sec
PRICE ₹ 88.33 Lakh



LUXE QUOTIENT

The MMI interface is fairly easy to use (Top); with a modern and elegant cabin (Above)

graceful wheel arches, optional footboards, and a bold Quattro badge on the side.

When you step into the Q7, you are greeted with well-appointed interiors where everything feels premium and rich to touch. There's a lot of tech, something that Audi has been consistent with, even in the Q8. The dash is adorned with two main screens—a 10.1-inch touchscreen display that

manages all your key functions and entertainment and an 8.6-inch display that sits right under it and specialises in comfort features such as adjusting your fully-powered seats and toggling the 4-zone climate control for the front two seats. Even the instrument cluster behind the driver is a screen. No one pulls off a virtual cockpit as efficiently as Audi. The HUD display is a great aid for drivers who

AUTO

TEST DRIVE



do not like to take their eyes off the road to read their ride details.

Comfort cocoon

The Audi Q7 pampers you once you're in. In addition to the multi-adjustment seats and decentralised climate zones, you also get ambient lighting up to 30 colours and aromatherapy delivered by the Air Ionizer. You can slide back the panoramic sunroof if you're driving into the sunset and take in the scents of the countryside if you will. The 19-speaker B&O audio setup is an easy assimilator of mood elevation. You can also avail of the lane-assist, 3D augmented-reality parking guides, MMI navigation, incredibly clever windshield wipers, and a

sensor-controlled boot lid operation.

The 3.0-litre, turbo-petrol 55 TFSI V6 engine is sufficiently powerful, conjuring up 340 ponies and 500Nm of torque. The SUV puts up no pretence of being a performance vehicle yet delivers a 0-100 kmph acceleration in just 5.9 seconds, even with all its bulk. The 8-speed gearbox is velvet smooth, and the car expresses itself eloquently through its driving modes that adjust the steering, air suspension, braking, and gearbox, as desired.

The delightful Audi Q7 has been among the most widely accepted luxury SUVs in the Indian market and the 2020 variant only gives buyers more reasons to seriously consider stabling it.



LUXURY ON WHEELS

The Quattro all-wheel drive offers a sporty and comfortable ride

HOT
LAUNCHES

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIMELESSNESS

While Rajasthan lives and breathes in a bubble of fragile memories; the Six Senses Fort Barwara effortlessly lives up to that cliché, yet manages to stand apart.

By CHUMKI BHARADWAJ



HOTEL

REVIEW

History coaxes the best out of Rajasthan, as it lulls contemplatively on the cusp of memory and echo. Basking in the gold of a shiny past; whimsical like the ghosts and stories that inhabit its bastions and battlements; transcendent like a dream, Six Senses Fort Barwara in Ranthambore embodies the essence of the desert state sans the obvious clichés.

Rising lofty, almost like a mirage, it looks down on the sleepy hamlet of Barwara, complete in the taupe glory of its 14th-century fort. The story of a fort-palace turned hotel seems part and parcel of Rajasthan's evolution to millennium mode. But this one begs to differ, if only because it chooses to wear the scars of age and dents of history as proud epaulettes. It is here that the collaboration with Six Senses makes its presence felt and it's a lasting impression. Unlike the imposing grandeur of Amber Fort or the obvious swagger of Jaipur and

Udaipur's fort-palace hotels, this one grows on you like a childhood crush that you initially ignore on the playground but slowly appreciate as thought and choices evolve.

It has been sensitively converted from fort and fantasy to a relaxed sensibility that is authentic yet indulgent in a conscionable way. It is striking in its simplicity, more so as it rides, or initially did, on the hype of hosting one of the more-talked about Bollywood weddings. But Sangjay Choegyal, the General Manager is quick to dispel its reputation as a wannabe wedding-destination hotel. Instead, the property focusses on offering a destination for history lovers, adventure seekers and wellness enthusiasts. Since it's only an easy thirty minute-drive from the Ranthambore National Park, it serves well as a base for wildlife pursuits if you're so inclined. As for the rest of us, being smothered in the lap of luxury, wrapped up in the pages of history draws on a different song.



NATURE'S PALETTE

Sunset paints a dreamy picture (Below); The facade of the hotel (Opposite Page)



HOTEL

REVIEW

What Gives...

Perched on its natural pedestal, the fort offers spectacular views of the Chauth ka Barwara temple, a white monolith resting on the opposing hill at a competing elevation. Meanwhile, the Barwara lake below, mirrors the reflection of both depending on the perspective of the onlooker, apart from adding to the sun's glory at dawn and dusk. The impressive conservation effort that took more than a decade to complete incorporates two original palaces and two temples within the walled fort. The restoration was designed to reinterpret the gracious and regal ambiance dating back 700 years but with an idea of partnering with the past, rather than using it as a prop.

While the public areas are housed within the ramparts of the old fort, the living quarters have been rebuilt to house 48 newly designed one-bedroom suites, including five specialty suites. Each suite is designed in contemporary Rajast-

hani style to complement the historic backdrop of the fort, while subtly incorporating state-of-the-art in-room technology and the legendary 'Sleep With Six Senses' standards that include handmade mattresses and cotton bedding, to promote restful sleep. The canopied beds, framed within the diaphanous veil of mosquito netting, are a nod to yesteryear's nostalgia as well as a pretty design frill.

That Healing Feeling

But it's not about gauze and gimmicks, but gauging preferences and aligning service accordingly. Guests can request a sleep tracker, the results of which are interpreted during a consultation with the in-house wellness expert, who will in turn recommend a personalised programme of lifestyle changes and treatments. As with all Six Senses properties, wellness is at the core of their brand of hospitality.



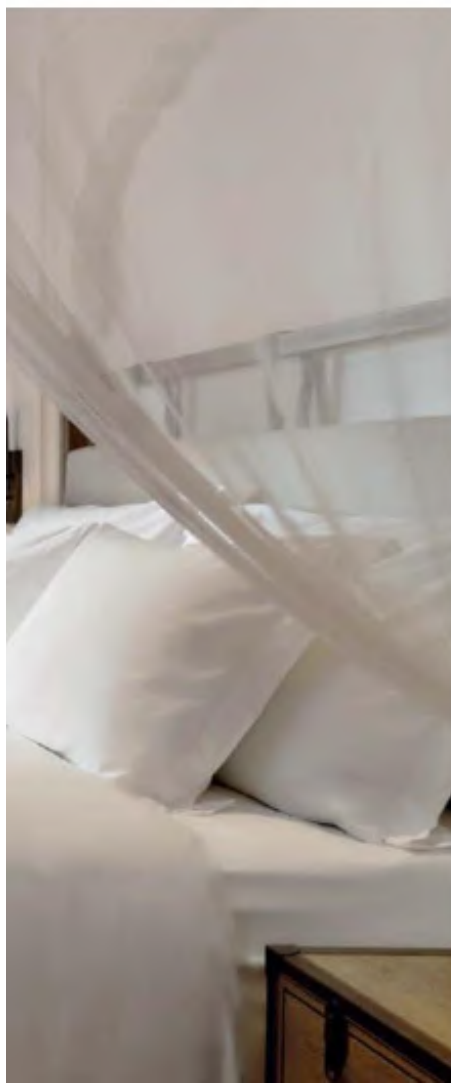
THE ART OF SLEEP

Suites offer handmade mattresses, cotton bedding, and additional sleep amenities to promote restful sleep (Below)





* **AWAKENING THE SENSES**
Natural ingredients with local and sustainable menus define food; Views of Barwara village (Above left)



The 30,000 square foot Six Senses Spa and fitness centre, located within the original women's palace, offers Ayurvedic and personalised wellness programmes. The staff is well-trained, genial and a pleasure to work with. The unhurried vibe of the entire resort begins at the spa. Starting with a personal consultation with the resident wellness director, spa treatments, Ayurvedic treatments and nurturing facials are recommended on a case by case basis.

Vegetate amidst the consciously curated local plants that dot the property, keeping it green, clean and open to the elements. Or cool off in the two swimming pools and outdoor Jacuzzi just to remind yourself not to grow roots. There are pottery and painting classes, workshops to make organic skincare, and daily safari drives if you're the kind who needs to be distracted from the lightness of being.

Sate the Soul

One of the more engaging experiences here is the one that usually holds most in its thrall: Food. Ravishing descriptions

of gustatory pleasures using fresh, seasonal and organic ingredients translates to food—although inspired—that stops short of excessive, either in terms of choices, complex flavours or clever presentation. Instead, Six Senses chooses a cleaner and simpler approach to food that balances quality with fresh wholesome food made from scratch. Teatime is extra special as local women dressed in traditional, vibrant desert colours, brew fresh tea in the corridor and walk around serving it in quaint earthen pots. Whether you prefer to chase the sunset with deeply fragrant masala tea or local liqueurs, choices are refreshing.

Between the temple bells that announce dusk to the orange sky that plays hide and seek with the fading ramparts, another fabulous day is sealed with the promise that under the canopy of the cloudless sky, some dreams do come true.

Price ₹70,000 per night

(Base category);

Contact <https://www.sixsenses.com/en/resorts/fort-barwara>

LAST LOOK



Time Travel

For most, escapism is a popular coping mechanism, but it's only in the hallowed portals of the watch world that it represents the acme of innovation and invention. With its new 5557-Mariné Hora Mundi, Manufacture Breguet invites you to escape with the reimaging of this particular Hora Mundi model within the Marine collection. Combining both technical and aesthetic variables, this timepiece plays with perspectives. At the time of its launch, the Hora Mundi became an instant hit because this mechanical watch—awarded four patents—featured an instant-change dual-time display. After selecting the first city's time and date, the owner of the watch need only set the second city. At that point, simply pressing the pusher is enough to travel from one end of the planet to the other, without disturbing the accurate running of the watch. For this model, the dial offers a fascinating interpretation of

the world on the wrist by a play on materials and superimposed plates. On the first gold base, the hand-guilloché waves lap gently against the shores of the continents, while the sunburst dial base embellished in abyssal blue creates the impression of a permanent waltz of the wave motifs.

While the sun is a luminous rose gold, the moon is rhodium-plated and exudes a mysterious grey appearance. The subtle finish referred to as *brouillage* is an ancient watchmaking decoration that has been updated to create a matt yet shiny effect. Get ready to globe trot with stylish options that include a leather strap, rubber strap or a gold bracelet. Dress it up or play it down, choice is what distinguishes the mundane from magic.

Price On Request; **Availability** Brand Stores



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MARCH 2022

SPRING FLING

How to dress your
interiors in colours,
motifs and patterns
for the season

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A MULTI-
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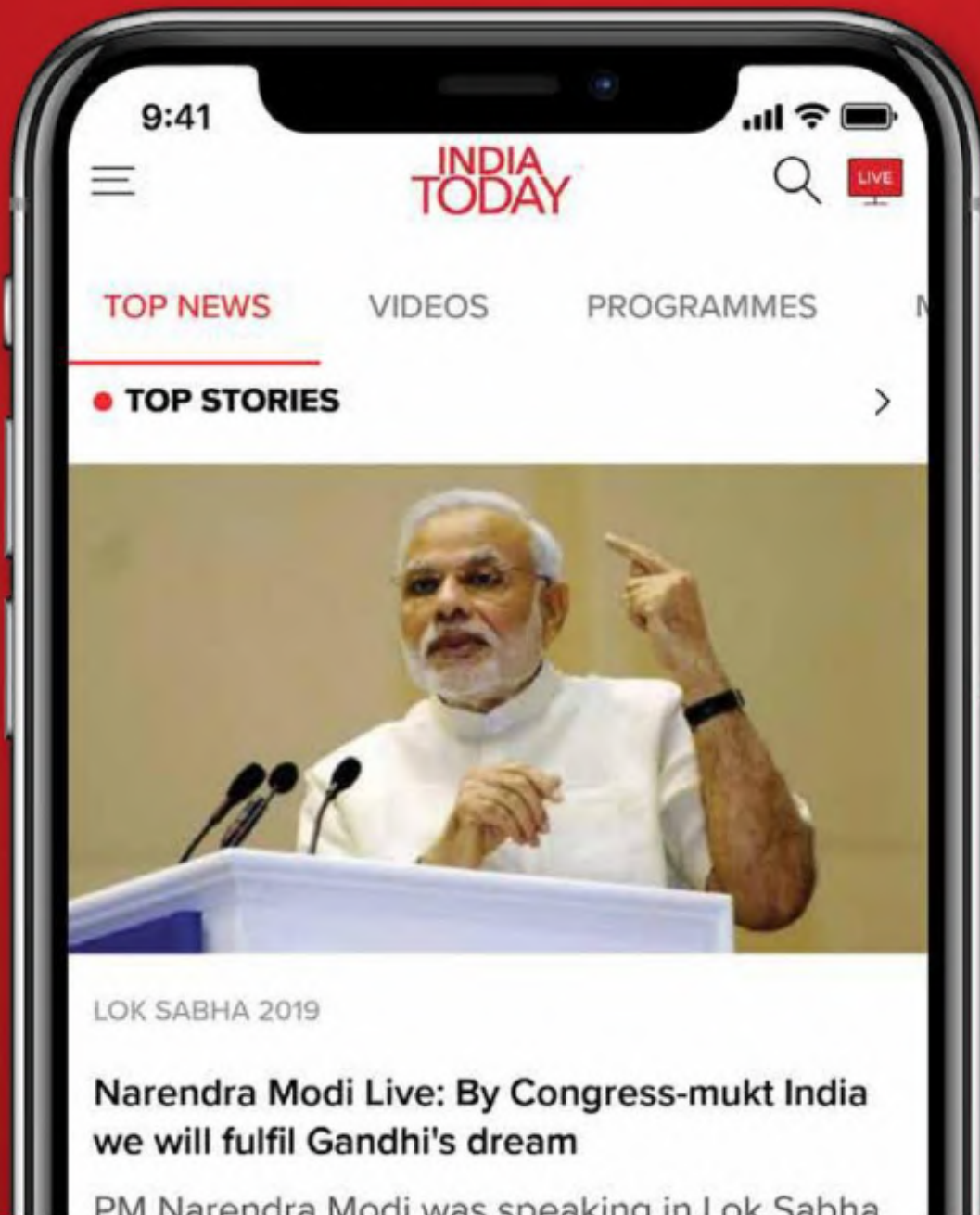


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Photograph courtesy ORANGE TREE

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A holiday home inspired by South India

COVER COURTESY: CLARKE & CLARKE, AVAILABLE AT MAISHAA

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Photo Courtesy NSAD Studio; Photograph by UMANG SHAH



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OPEN UP

This home in Ahmedabad makes room for the all the needs of its inhabitants

Photo Courtesy IKEA



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A look at an apparel brand's long awaited home and decor line



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कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

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उपलब्ध है



iSpy

Your guide to the hottest
new stores and products

By RIDHI KALE



All that Glitters

Hermosa Casa, a luxury home decor brand based in Mumbai has released a new collection called Glitz and Gold. Each piece be it the jar, the showpiece or even the table, has an element of gold.

PRICE ₹1,000 to ₹25,000

AT www.hermosacasa.in



OUT OF THE BOX

You can call this a steal. Arttdinox has unveiled its latest stainless steel home collection inspired by the art of ikat. The collection heroes fine craftsmanship and innovative design, comprising pieces such as platters, coasters, serving trays, and cups and saucers.

PRICE ₹3,795

AT www.gifting.arttdinox.com



FESTIVE FARE

HEMBJUDEN, Ikea's festive collection is all set to make your home feel warm and welcoming. The new collection has two themes, a vibrant Moroccan tile pattern and an intricate floral print in black and white. The collection is a collaboration between Jennifer Idrizi, a UK-based designer and Andreas Fredriksson, the in-house designer at IKEA.

PRICE ₹499 onwards

AT www.ikea.com



It's Got A Luxe Appeal

Kohler has launched a new Indigo Bathroom Suite in the Colour of the Year. Indigo is the oldest natural dye known to mankind and has been an important colour in art. In India, indigo was discovered some 5,000 years ago, during the Indus Valley civilization and India became one of the earliest major centres for its production and processing. This blue substance was used to colour everything from army uniforms to the Queen's bed linen and made its way to the Greeks and the Romans, where it was tagged to be a sign of luxury. Kohler always strives to bring the ultimate luxury products to the discerning Indian consumers hence launching, 'Colour of the Year – Indigo'.

PRICE on request AT www.kohler.co.in



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Manoj Sharma

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Weave a Dream

Here's something new, exciting and sustainable to try—water-hyacinth cushions and pillows by Connecting NER, an artisanal brand from north east India. These handmade beauties use water-hyacinth, a wildly and fast growing aquatic weed in Assam to create magic.

PRICE ₹850 (matted version)

and ₹950 (criss cross woven)

AT @connectingner (Instagram)



For A Nippon Nook

Mohh's new collection is inspired by unique patterns and shapes of Ikebana.

An assortment of unusually designed cabinets, side-boards, stools and coffee tables with a play on geometric shapes and accents form the new range.

PRICE ₹8,999 (Sakura Bar Stool)

AT www.mohh.com

news Launches

In High Spirits

Get ready to entertain well with Elm & Oak's unique barware collection. Featured here is the Valencia Barware Stand and Accessories.

The rich finish of this collection makes it a must-have for mixology enthusiasts. It includes a stainless steel peg measure, bottle opener, strainer and stirrer.

PRICE ₹3,270

AT www.elmandoak.in



WHIM MEETS WONDER

This UK-based brand is all about adding colour, charisma, quirk and fun to your interiors

By RIDHI KALE

Much like its clothing, Marks & Spencer's homeware line is fun and fresh. The India launch is all about showcasing their bestselling homeware range. Launched earlier this month, there is a wide range to choose from.

Those looking to redo their spaces for the summer should definitely browse through their bedding range, especially the Egyptian cotton duvets. Equally alluring are the bathroom essentials such as towels and mats in prints and quirky designs. The brand has always been known for its emphasis on wellness making their apothecary range of fragrance diffusers, aroma candles, room sprays and sleep burner gift sets very special.

PRICE ₹1,499 onwards (bedding); ₹999 onwards (bath range); ₹799 onwards (apothecary collection)
AT www.marksandspencer.in



MIX AND MATCH
(clockwise from above) The barware range; fragrance diffusers, tea lights and masks from the apothecary collection; cute zebra plate



SUBTLE SOPHISTICATION

Soft hues, clever spatial design and a refreshing outlook makes this home in Bangalore perfect for the season

By **SMITHA ZACHARIAH**

The Leela residence embodies the characteristics of a happy, cheerful and rejuvenating space through the use of colour, textures, decor and subtle nuances incorporated through intricate inlay work and layering of various design elements. Since the home is reflective of qualities that are similar to the feeling evoked by the advent of spring—it can be said that every part of this space is reminiscent of the warmth and colours that the spring season brings along with it. The home was a very standard space like a typical 3BHK apartment with nothing out of ordinary. So, we had to innovate and design such that the space has a sense of formality, whimsy, and wonder. The client wanted a home that exudes happiness and is colourful. So, for the interiors we took inspiration from bright colours and retro tinged spaces that are bold and dynamic, with an added India Modern touch to them.

The clients are an easy-going couple with two young kids. They love to spend time with their family at home and wanted a space that is colourful, cheerful, and happy. The use of colours, textures and finishes was done in a way that allowed the space to feel layered, open, and airy with a slight touch of India Modern. The homeowner used to be the owner of one of the biggest fabric stores in Bangalore. I met him a long time ago and he loved the way I worked with fabrics and colours. I think that is one of the biggest reasons why he chose me as the designer for this project.

As one enters the home, there is a console table with a

Photographs by: GOKUL RAO KADAM OF MEISTER MESTER PHOTOGRAPHY





EAT TREAT

The dining room is a symphony of colours picked up from the abstract artwork on the accent wall

FACT FILE

LOCATION Bangalore

SIZE 2,600 sq ft

NUMBER OF BEDROOMS Three bedrooms and one TV room

INTERIOR DESIGN FIRM
ZxP Design



Smitha Zachariah is an interior designer and founder of Bengaluru-based firm ZxP Design. www.zxp.design





COLOUR CUES

(clockwise from above) Beautifully handcrafted cabinet; the outdoor area; view of the living room; the kid's bedroom; deep blue cupboard and shelf

beautiful painting hanging over it. This leads to the dining room that flows seamlessly into the living room—where soft colours and distinct accents add to the character of the room. Just near the living area is the master bedroom with regal arched niches as a unique design element. A corridor from here leads to the son's room, daughter's room, and the TV room. The most used materials in the interiors are wood, marble in décor and furniture and intricate inlay work.

Wall panelling is used throughout the house to give a sense of formality to the space. A lot of texture is used in terms of subtle patterns and colours. We have worked with brass accents and inlay work for décor and used wooden flooring throughout the house. The colours in this home are a bit subdued with a special emphasis on white—as the space feels fresh and airy and other colours play up very nicely against white.

The outdoor seating area brings in a distinctive touch with its colour and décor that is reminiscent of Moroccan design traditions. It is a charming area where inlay pieces are used for handcrafting and even the carpet has a subtle Samarkand feel to it.

Every room is unique highlighting the user's personality and reflecting the ideals of a happy and cheerful space.

ROOM TO BLOOM

From furniture to crockery, floral motifs, prints, and patterns are the perfect and quick way to bring spring indoors. Here's how.

By **RIDHI KALE**



STAND OUT

Here's a way to have your cake and eat it too. The Opium Cake Stand from Kainaat (available at The House of Things) has an enchanting Songbird perched in a garden filled with colourful wild roses and oriental poppies. Carefully hand enamelled, the wooden top sits on a hand fluted steel base.

PRICE ₹2,350

AT www.thehouseofthings.com



FIRST CHAIR

The Crinoline Armchair by B&B Italia (available at Scala Home) has been designed by Patricia Urquiola. The high backrest is characterised by a wide hollow base. The backrest has a floral interlacing motif while the curved double shell silhouette has a polyethylene fibre interlacing. The seat cushion is upholstered in a wide range of outdoor fabrics.

PRICE on request

AT [@scala.home](https://www.instagram.com/scala.home) (Instagram)

COME UP ROSES

Designed by Carla Tolomeo, the Moi et la Rose Sofa by Siciis (available at Tessera India) has a solid timber and poplar plywood frame. What stands out are the roses and the decorative artistic mosaic accents.

PRICE on request

AT www.tesseraindia.com





BE BOLD

Use one statement piece to add drama and freshness to your space. Featured here is the Dilli Night Stand from Casa Pop (available at The House of Things). The collection is inspired by love for Delhi.

PRICE on request

AT www.thehouseofthings.com

YOU'VE BEEN SERVED

Take your gastronomic journey to a whole new level with these floral pattern Indigo plates from Beyond Designs Home. The range comprises dinner, side, and salad plates.

PRICE on request

AT [@beyonddesignshome](https://www.instagram.com/beyonddesignshome) (Instagram)



DINE OUT

Sylist and designer Sanjyt Singh has come up with a concept called Spring Al Fresco Dining that allow you to bring in a fresh and vibrant look to outdoor living. Its got everything from a fun flower arrangement, floral table mats, fun crockery and some bright candles.

PRICE on request

AT [@sanjytsingh](https://www.instagram.com/sanjytsingh) (Instagram)



ACCENT PIECE

The Origami Rose Peg Table from Ochre at Home takes its cues from the delicate folds in origami art. Finished in porcelain-like lacquer, the hand-painted spring flowers add elegance to the room.

PRICE on request
AT www.ochreathome.com



HAUTE SEAT

This accent two-seater sofa from Beyond Designs is framed in wood with a pretty floral fabric upholstery.

PRICE on request
AT www.beyonddesigns.in



BLACK BEAUTY

Stack, stash and store all your essentials in this Credenza from The Black Attitude Collection by Momenti (available at Ottimo).

Made from melamine covered wood structure, it also uses resins and black matt lacquer, while the open compartment is in black Lacobel glass.

PRICE on request AT www.ottimo.in



HOLY COW

Sturdy yet sleek fine bone China, hand decorated with lotus designs inspired by Pichwai paintings and highlighted with 24-karat gold, the Pichwai Coffee Mug from Kaunteya are a sight to behold.

PRICE ₹2,300
(set of two)
AT www.kaunteya.in



DISPLAY DRAMA

Titled Banish the Princess, this ceramic plate with custom digital print is from The Plated Project (available at The House of Things). It comes with a foldable display stand, pre-attached wall mount and a special card with a lovely story.

PRICE ₹2,400
AT www.thehouseofthings.com

REFRESH AND REVIVE



Let spring in with these home textiles. Not only will it give your interiors a much-needed facelift, it will make your space shine.

By **RIDHI KALE**

Much like your wardrobe your home too requires that seasonal makeover. And there's no better season than spring to have fun with playful motifs, fresh colours and beautiful fabrics. So, where should you start? With the furnishings, of course. They are a quick and relatively inexpensive way to give your home a completely new look.

New Idea

If you are looking for a creative way to introduce home fabrics then turn to buntings just like these from House of Ekam. "Buntings are a great inexpensive way to add a pop of colour and whimsy to your garden, balcony or even the bedroom. They are multipurpose, easy to care for and offer a unique look," says Tanvi Agarwal, founder, House of Ekam.

PRICE ₹499 (zero-waste tropical safari buntings)

AT www.houseofekam.com



Not Just Pillow Talk

Spring is all about colour and cheer; these cushions from Eris Home are nothing short of that. "When selecting the size of cushions, its key that it looks balanced upon the piece of furniture it's intended for. For instance if you have a three-seater sofa opt for 20x20 inch cushions, you can also place 18x18 inch cushions in front of them to create a multi-layer chic look.

For single-seaters lumbar cushions that are typically 14x22 inches work well," says Sanjana Lunia, founder and creative head, Eris Home.

PRICE ₹1,300 to ₹2,000
AT www.erishome.com

Walk on This

When it comes to spring makeovers your floor covering can make or mar the look of the room. Go for something soft and soothing, like this one from House of Rugs. "Your spring rug should be lightly woven to allow breathability and have a fun design to complement all decor schemes, geometric designs are trending at the moment and add that sparkle to the space," says Aishwarya Gupta, founder, House of Rugs. PRICE ₹16,000 (Marquise Rug)
AT www.houseofrugs.in





The Right Side of the Bed

Giving your bedroom a spring makeover will not only make the space feel fresh, but also help you relax and unwind. You can take your cues from Sarita Handa's new bed linen collection. "Capturing patterns from nature and creating unique designs with newer techniques by seamlessly blending natural elements into textile is the underlying design principle," says Suprana Handa, managing director, Sarita Handa.

PRICE ₹18,200

AT www.saritahanda.com



Fancy Fabrics

Transform that drab sofa into a showstopper with the right fabrics. Take a tip of two from Beyond Dreams' Versailles collection. "The colour you choose speaks volumes, especially during the season where everything is new and fresh. A silky to touch material with a pretty floral pattern for the sofa upholstery resonates beautifully with spring," says Avani Juneja, Founder and Creative Director, Beyond Dreams.

PRICE ₹2,500 onwards

AT @BeyondDreams (Instagram)

THE NORDIC ALLURE

Form without function can finally RIP; this spring, a Swedish apparel giant's home line is showing how utilitarian, modern interiors can be effortlessly chic

By **RIDHI KALE**

Have we had too much of Scandinavian design—their easy aesthetic, clean lines, subtle but impactful pieces? While many maximalists were busy predicting its end, homeowners have found it perfect for the spring season. The long queues outside the recently launched H&M Home, is a case in point. The new launch has ensured an exciting month for decor enthusiasts and purveyors of good design. H&M's home line offers stylish, sustainable and affordable products for your space. From dinnerware to bed linen, from candle holders to kitchen essentials, there is a lot to choose from. We caught up with Evelina Kravaev-Söderberg, head of design and creative, H&M HOME about the launch, trends and more.

Why launch H&M Home in India now?

We always listen to our customers. In India there's a high demand and interest in interiors and design, and H&M's existing customers often asked for interior products in line with the H&M business concept.



What makes the spring collection special?

Spring at H&M HOME is a sign of the times—brighter days and summer sun enrich the collection in soft colours and abstract prints. The season's collections invite Zen and harmony into homes, urging people to find pleasure in the everyday with comforting details. We wanted the season to mark a new start for homes as the leaves change colour again and sought to create a welcoming oasis in the midst of the bustling city life. The collection also features abstract prints and edgy shapes that are mood-boosting and really breathe life into spaces.

What are the spring design trends?

With so much time being spent at home, living spaces are becoming strong aspects of people's personalities and an extension of their being and individuality. The major design trend for the year is for spaces to tell stories about the people who live in them, and we will see lots of colour and in general a sense of optimism.





OBJECTS OF BEAUTY

(clockwise from top) A living room setting; Evelina Kravaev-Söderberg; glass candle holders; kitchen storage solutions; all from H&M Home



Any favourite piece from the new collection?

I just love everything about it, so very difficult to choose. Springtime is the season to declutter, and I adore the pragmatic storage solutions we have crafted this season, both for the kitchen and for the bathroom. When things have their own space, life becomes easier and the mind becomes clearer, allowing you to truly focus on the things that matter. For the kitchen, we have some cool utensil holders crafted in ceramic, to hold and display cutlery, along with linen bread bags that keep food fresh for longer. For the bathroom, we have designed a fabulous golden tray to keep everything in place with a stunning opulent colour that adds a touch of flair to the bathroom.

PRICE ₹149 to ₹25,999

THE RIGHT VIBES

Bring in positivity and happiness as we look at vastu and importance of the north direction

By RAJNI RATHI



This & that

Vastu



Interior designer and vastu expert Dr Rajni Rath is also the director Tatyia Impressions.
www.tatyiamimpressions.com

Vastu Shastra finds its origin in *sthapatya veda upveda* of the *Athrao Veda*. It is an ancient science that deals with study of designing spaces in interpersonal relationship with the forces of nature and cosmic energy. Directions and orientations play a very important role. Since we live in a world full of latest technologies, modern infrastructure and high rise buildings following principles of ancient times is not possible however if we understand the logic we can apply it in much simple ways without compromising on aesthetics.

We can create beautiful spaces with balanced energies which in turn help individuals to live a happy and prosperous life. Vastu is a very vast subject it cannot be covered in one article so to make things simpler we will start with basics. Vastu talks about 16 directions cardinal, diagonal and sub diagonal. They are: north, south, east, west, south east, south west, north west, north east, east north east, north north east, west north west, north north west, east south east, south south east, west south west, south south west. In this piece we will talk about north direction.

The north direction is ruled by Kubera, the Hindu god known for prosperity and wealth. The planet associated with this direction is mercury. Mercury rules: trading, intelligence,

skin, communication, writing skills, education, languages, acting skills, playfulness and intellectual abilities. All the above mentioned areas are very important to achieve success in life. Another interesting aspect one must highlight is the colour green. It represents hope and prosperity.

It is best to understand the vastu principles through an example. If you are facing problems in business such as financial crunch, lack of creative thinking, or if your children are not concentrating on studies, or if you have skin problems, or even problems with your own sisters or father's sister then you need to check the north zone of your house. Perhaps you have a toilet in north, store area in the north, no windows or openings in north, kitchen in the north or maybe north is higher than the southwest zone of the house.

So, what are the remedies? Ensure there are lots of openings, windows, balconies doors. Hang huge mirrors to enhance the energy. Do not block the space with heavy wardrobes or a storage area. Plants are very good to keep as mercury represents the plant kingdom. Most of the space should be left open to let the energy flow freely. If physical changes are not possible there are other ways that vary from person to person, to enhance the energy and bring in positivity and happiness.

Illustration by RAJ VERMA



Photographs courtesy TATYIA IMPRESSIONS

PACKING A PUNCH

Earthy, terracotta textured wall in the living room is complemented by a jungle green sofa with wicker embellishments and an old Kerala-style wicker easy chair.



INDIAN BY DESIGN

This holiday home in the Sahyadri Mountains brings a slice of South India to the otherwise relaxed and easy-going aesthetic

By **AMRITHA KARNAKAR**

The brief from the client was that the house was to have a traditional South Indian vibe with modern amenities. The home has a lot of colour, artworks and quirks. The house needed to represent their roots and though it was a holiday home they wanted it to have a sense of home—comfortable and energetic. It's a plot area of 3,000 sq ft and carpet area of 2,500 sq ft. The 2BHK standalone holiday home is nestled in the hills of the Sahyadri Mountains surrounded by green landscape on all four sides, in Khopoli, the outskirts of Mumbai.

The Layout

As you enter the house you are welcomed by a beautiful Ganesha wooden statue adorned by intricate South Indian temple detailed brass elements, accentuated by an Indian rustic long mirror to complement the space. One is automatically transported to a home in the south of India. This then leads you to the main house, which overlooks a small cosy personal garden. It's an open layout with the sofa and living area on the left and the dining and open



Architect Amritha Karnakar is the founder and creative head of Mumbai-based practice, AKAD (Amritha Karnakar Architectural Design). www.amrithakarnakar.com

kitchen to the right. The living area is highlighted with an earthy, terracotta textured wall, complimented by a dark jungle green sofa with wicker embellishments. The old wicker easy chair is reminiscent of the grandfather sitting with his legs atop in the front porch of the Kerala bungalow reading his newspaper. The green kalamkari daybed on the other side overlooks the green garden. Brass elements such as



pots and face mask on the centre table and the floor lamps add to the Indian touch.

Heart of the Home

The central staircase is the only partial divide between the living room and the dining kitchen. The dining is positioned close to the window thus overlooking the lovely banana plants in the garden. The wooden dining table has an alternate wicker and nature print fabric chair. The green glass and brass hanging lamp over the dining table compliments the greens outside. The brass vintage South Indian tiffin boxes and pickle jars enhance the look of the dining table.

A Glass Apart

The glass façade brings in a lot of natural light and green scape visual of the garden

FACT FILE

Location:

Khopoli, Maharashtra

Month and year of completion:

Jan, 2021

Area:

3,000 sq ft (plot area)

Art:

Chandan Dubey

Furniture:

Gulmohar Lane, Maram Furniture, Magnolia





SOUTHERN SENSATION

(anti-clockwise from above) The dining room overlooks the banana trees outside; a wooden ganesha statue and typical South Indian brass elements welcome you as you enter the home; the daughter's bedroom with a special carved South Indian style four-poster bed; the daybed in the living space overlooks the garden



adorned by bamboo, banana, mango and papaya trees. We used an antique wooden and brass swing traditionally called Unjal in the garden to enjoy the outdoors. Stone elephant carved blocks carving the brass urli's enhance the garden.

Private Paradise

The master bedroom has a dark wooden bed complemented by a South Indian wall hung mirror and dark wood wooden thin panels. The headboard banana print fabric adds to the South Indian vibe. The dark forest green study table overlooks the green landscape outside. The daughter's bedroom has a special, carved South Indian four poster bed. The dark green wall backdrop works beautifully along with this carved four poster bed.

In this holiday home in regards to the size and scale of the house, we have tried to keep it really simple, clean and as open as possible to be closest to nature. The idea is to design a home away from home. So keeping the clients in mind, we have kept the house in a very deep culturally rooted in South Indian, yet relaxed and easy.

Spaces
Architecture

AN OPEN

WHAT A VIEW

The living room
seamlessly moves
into the dining and
the open kitchen

PLAN

This apartment in Ahmedabad fuses two different design styles to give rise to a sun-kissed, light and airy home

By NACHIKET SHELAT & NISHITA KEDIA

Photographs by UMANG SHAH | TEXT BY NISHITA KEDIA

This luxurious apartment in Ahmedabad marks the coming together of mid-century aesthetics and neo-classical elements. Spanning over 2,500 sq ft designed for a multi-generational family it showcases a sensible spatial alchemy. Our starting point was planning an open floor space. While it's an open plan, we have carved out spaces to suit the individuality of the dwellers.

Blended in a drama of raw textures and a dash of luxury, the entry porch reflects a perfect canvas of stillness to this beautiful home. A 'tree of life' artwork aligning with the client's ethos adorns this space along with a large pivot door opening its gateway to this opulent apartment.

We then transformed the ceiling of the apartment into a singular roof in warm natural oak wood finesse that spans across the public areas drifting away from the feel of an apartment living. The ridge of the



INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

(clockwise from above) Close-up of the dining table; the master bedroom; a view of the living room; another bedroom

Nachiket Shelat and Nishita Kedia are the founders of NSAD Studio, an Ahmedabad-based avant-garde architecture and interior design firm. www.nsad.in



roof is accentuated in a raw concrete texture that draws a continuous axis through the entire apartment.

While the entire apartment is a vocabulary of elegantly crafted elements, the expansive windows weave the magic by letting in subdued natural light filtering through the vertical gardens in each space, one of the other unique features of the apartment.

The living room has fine gold accents and mid-summer green. A customised centre table in raw grey concrete neatly sits in the lounge area separating the sofa from the signature armchairs. A shelving unit interspersed with greens and treasured items divides this floor space with a bijou dining room and an open kitchen which is accented in a white and soft grey palette adding sophisticated touches to the space.

The neat cuboid carved out in the



open floor plan that sits as the home theatre room has been conceived with a subtle playfulness of geometric patterns on the wall facades. One of the two bedrooms adjoining the home theatre is a stylish ensemble of neoclassical elements with muted metal accents in black. The cloud grey wall panel provides a chic backdrop behind the soft grey upholstered bed overlooking the vertical greens. A floating desk with a wall mounted vanity mirror creates a cosy corner to complement the ambience of this bedroom.

Swathed in beautiful red bricks silently enveloping the ceiling to form a canopy, the other of the two bedrooms are a treat to the eyes. With every little detail curated beautifully, this luxurious bed suite with hints of gold and a soft teal palette, designed with an inspiration drawn from modern and traditional elements has an elevated charm in terms of its style. The hanging wooden vanity mirror over the customised console unit perfectly frames the grandeur of this classy bedroom.

Clearly, this home with a mix of styles, hues and design is a feast for your eyes.

From the Runway to Your Room

An iconic fashion house forays into the world of interiors with a new home line

By RIDHI KALE

Anyone familiar with the Satya Paul aesthetic knows how it revels in bringing something new and fresh. Their new home line does not disappoint. Marking the launch of a new store in Delhi's iconic Khan Market, the range includes cushions, table runners, and wallpapers. Nature takes centre stage here. Indian flowers such as mogra appear as elegant motifs through the pieces. We also loved the playful monkeys, botanical accents and the psychedelic patterns. Bringing the focus on the art of craft while giving it a modern semantic, we found this one refreshing and fun.

PRICE on request



CUSHION COMFORT

Be it nature-inspired motifs or abstract designs, bright hues or subtle monotones, Satya Paul's new home line is refreshing



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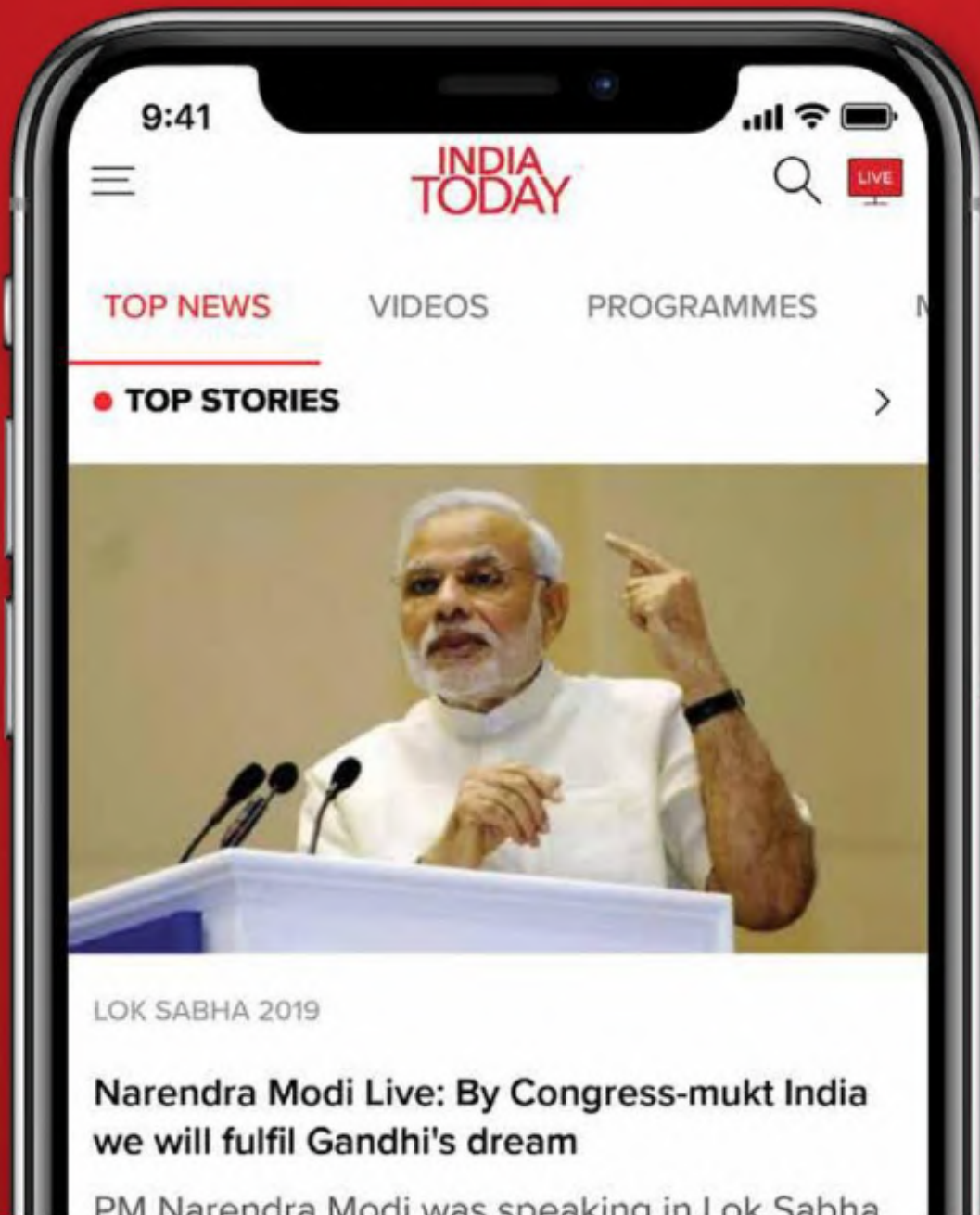
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